MISS PAT'S HOLIDAYS at GREYCROFT

PEMBERTON GINTHER

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THE "MISS PAT" SERIES

Nine Volumes

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SHE SWEPT ON GROWING MORE ELATED WITH EVERY STROKE OF HER STEELY RUNNERS.

MISS PAT'S HOLIDAYS AT GREYCROFT

BY
PEMBERTON GINTHER

FRONTISPIECE BY
THE AUTHOR

PHILADELPHIA
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To the White Mouse, Otherwise Known as
Janie the Muffer.

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Miss Pat's Holidays at Greycroft

CHAPTER I

AROUND THE CHRISTMAS HEARTH

"ISN'T it too bad that Bruce and Elinor had to run away before the best of the fun?" said Patricia, selecting a chocolate from the dish on the tea table at her elbow. "Of course, Christmas day is the very best day of all the year, but it's really only the beginning of Christmas. Don't you think so, Mrs. Nat?"

The big south room at Greycroft was aglow with candles and firelight and its air was spicy with odors of balsam and spruce and juniper. Holly berries winked redly from the masses on wall and mantelshelf, and laurel twined its glossy lengths about pillars and picture frames and along the hand-rail of the beautiful old stair,

while waxen mistletoe peeped above each wide doorway.

Patricia at the tea table was dispensing some of Hannah Ann's delectable little cakes, together with steaming cups of the rather weak tea which that firm overseer allowed them, to the group about the crackling fire, and it was plain to be seen that the occasion was a particularly festive one. The tea table alone would have proved that. Its china was the very choicest of Greycroft's dainty store, the lace tea cloth, the delicate embroidered napkins, the sparkling silver service, and the new rose-shaded lamp were proof positive of a holiday. The laurel and holly and mistletoe, together with the air of special gayety which pervaded the whole room, all bespoke the one season of the year—that season of peace and good-will when the gentle spirit of Bethlehem comes for a brief span to walk our streets and sit beside our hearths.

Mrs. Nathaniel Spicer, brave in shimmering blue silk, laced and furred in the top of the prevailing fashion, stirred her tea

and cocked her narrow head sideways in her old quizzical fashion, while her keen, protruding blue eyes crinkled assent in the way that Patricia loved.

"That certainly is the way I feel about it, Miss Pat," she said with her deep husky chuckle. "I'm free to confess that I'm usually so dead beat on Christmas day that all I'm fit for is to sit still and be thankful. What with racing myself to death beforehand and the prospect of gadding myself to the bone afterwards, I've come to take Christmas day for a real quiet home day, a sort of holy day. The holidays don't begin for me till the Christmas stars have twinkled over that blessed manger at Bethlehem like they did on that first night. Then, after the holy day's over, I'm ready for the holiday, hammer and tongs, teas, parties and all. And the curious thing is that the more I've realized the Child in the manger on that blessed day, the readier I am, on the next, to plunge into the fun."

Mrs. Nat's words, in spite of her light manner, held a vibrating tone of loving

faith that went home to each of the little group about the hearth rug. The picture that her words suggested rose before them—the angel message, the stable and the Child—and they were all silent for a little space, and then Miriam Halden, who was lounging in a corner of the davenport, staring dreamily at the fire, said:

"Isn't it queer how differently everybody really does behave at Christmas time? In the stores and street cars, I mean. Everybody's so good-natured, so different from other times. If you poke a bundle into people's backs, they only laugh and joke about it, instead of scowling and glaring at you. And the Christmas Eve crowds are the jolliest! Dad took Madelon and me into the stores in town last year, and we had the time of our lives. Sardines weren't in it with us for crowding, but nobody minded a bit. It was such a jolly jumble that I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

Tom Hughes, who was spending the holidays with his chum, nodded appreciatively. "It's great, isn't it?" he said,

dropping an extra lump of sugar into his cup. "Awful row and crowd, but you like it. Funny, how much you like it."

"I don't think it's queer at all," said small Judith in her composed voice.

She was sitting close to Miss Pat and the rosy shimmer from the tea-table lamp glowed on the smooth pale gold of her straight-hanging locks, on the growing curve of her slender, serious face, and on the delicate hands clasped in the lap of her simple holiday frock of dull russet velvet. The long months at Greycroft with Miss Pat and Miriam had added vigor and almost vivacity to her childish figure, and although, to her intense disgust, she had not yet begun to grow, she had passed very successfully from the ugly duckling stage into a decidedly attractive girl, and Patricia looked with loving pride at her small sister as she shook back her pale hair and spoke with conviction.

"I don't think it's queer at all," she said calmly. "Most everybody likes to be good—only they haven't time and they

forget. But, you see, at Christmas there are lots and lots of things to remind them. There are the store windows, and the Santa Claus at the corners, and 'Peace on earth, good-will to men' stuck up everywhere. I think it would be queer if they weren't nicer now than at any other time of the year. They just can't help it."

Patricia smiled at the decisive manner in which the subject was disposed of, but Ted, on the hearth rug, shook sadly his head at the young sage.

"Judy's getting wiser all the time," he said plaintively. "If we did what we ought, Tom, we'd cut college and spend the rest of the term taking notes from Miss Minerva here. It's a pity we've got to go back, when we've a regular fountain of wisdom right at home."

Judith, who was usually an easy victim to Tom's teasing, was not very much disturbed, though she did toss her head the tiniest fraction, and perhaps her tone was a shade milder than customary as she answered smoothly, "Don't be childish, Ted dear. You know that I'm right

about it, only you're sort of ashamed to say so—boys are so reticent about their feelings."

Patricia and Miriam bubbled at this condescending, elderly speech, and Mrs. Nat chuckled her deepest, but the two youths burst into a howl of insulted manhood, pretending to glare at Judith with wild ferocity.

"Boys!" they shouted. "*Boys!*"

"Do you know, young woman, that I have passed far beyond my nineteenth summer?" demanded Tom Hughes in the deepest bass he could squeeze from his chest. "And my companion, Francis Edward David Carson Kendall, is bearing hard on the venerable age of eighteen winters? Boys, indeed! And this from a chit of bare fourteen! My faith! reverence and veneration are clean out of fashion in these parlous days! Say I not true, trusty comrade?"

"Sure Mike," responded Ted with a return to his usual manner. "I'd feel a heap worse about it, though, if I didn't know what's made Ju so unnaturally uppity.

She's all cocked up over posing for that St. Thingummy in the drawing that Elinor was making a couple of days ago in the studio for some stained glass window or other. I've noticed a sort of halo floating about over her head ever since—Ow, Miss Pat, that's not fair! You made me spill half my tea. You oughtn't to throw chocolates at a fellow's head that way!"

Patricia giggled at the collapse of Tom's dignity as he scrambled with Ted on the hearth rug for the sweets she had flung for Judith's defence, and even that correct young lady herself could not resist a ripple at the sight of the two venerables struggling for the morsels like any urchins might have done.

Tom covered one of the caramels with a resolute hand and Ted was equally determined to unearth it. "Hand it over, old fellow," he said firmly. "I'll have it if it takes all night."

Mrs. Spicer smiled and shook her head as she set down her emptied cup. "Dear me, to think of it," she said, speaking clearly to be heard by the contestants on

the rug. "I came over here expressly to ask you all to a coasting party on Dutch Hill tonight, but of course if you're——"

A delighted chorus answered her. The chocolates were forgotten and everybody was clamoring for details.

"Is the snow hard enough?" asked Miriam in surprise. "It was soft as mush when Bruce and Elinor left this afternoon. They had to take the carriage to the station."

"Who's going beside us?" inquired Patricia, sniffing a party. "Is Uncle Nat going, too?"

"Where'll we get sleds enough?" demanded Tom. "Have they any big ones at the store?"

"What time are we to be ready?" added Ted briskly. "I'll have to gun up an outfit."

Mrs. Spicer held up her hands, laughing at their eagerness. "Mercy on us! One at a time, please," she parried. "Wait till I get breath for such a string of answers. Yes, Miriam, the snow's all right. Wind's in the northwest, and when I came in it was crunching under my goloshes like

Arctic regions itself. Ruth Grim and Marian Johnstone are getting it up, Miss Pat, and sent word by me for anyone who was here and wanted to come. They have three big bob-sleds and there'll be a score of smaller ones, Tom Hughes, and you're to meet at eight o'clock at the corner of Dutch Lane, Ted. Of course, I'm not going to be such an old goose as to be there. I'll be home with Nathaniel and Mama, as I should be, but you're all to come back by half-past nine, and have something good and warm before you go home to bed. There, now, you're all answered and Judith's the only one who hasn't pestered. Haven't you a question, little girl, before I get into my duds and hurry off home? I promised Ruth I'd be there by five and it's half-past already, this very blessed minute."

Judith was sitting quietly in her chair. Patricia noticed that her hands in the lap of her russet frock were tightly clasped, a habit of Judith's when trying to hide some emotion, and her head was held erect as though to ward off tears.

"Why, Judy girl," she cried, with a swift understanding. "You don't think we're going to leave you at home all by yourself, do you? You're going, too—unless you'd rather stay home or go to Mrs. Shelly's till we come."

Judith's face underwent a lightning change. "Oh, I do so want to go," she said ardently, unclasping her hands to seize Patricia's. "It's the first time we've ever been in the country when there was snow, and I'm simply *aching* to know how it feels to coast down a long, long hill. I've been dreaming of it for months, ever since you got Elinor and Bruce to let us stay here at Greycroft for the winter, Miss Pat. And it's been so long coming. I thought it would never, never snow. It's been such a horrid warm fall that I was afraid we'd miss all the fun of real country winter—skating and coasting and all that!"

Patricia rippled at her eagerness. "It's plain to be seen you haven't the cares of a poultry yard on your mind, like Miriam and your humble servant," she laughed,

"or you wouldn't be speaking so disrespectfully of the nice warm weather we've been having. We were hoping it would last forever——"

Ted interrupted with a sniff. "You girls put up a big bluff about that poultry business," he said mockingly. "Henry let the cat out of the bag this morning. He told me that you'd hired him to do most of the work at the Patrick Hennery for almost a month. So don't pretend you're too devoted to that poultry yard, young ladies."

Patricia took the accusation easily. "Well, there isn't much to do now," she said nonchalantly. "Miriam and I go the rounds once a day and Henry does the rest. It's the off season with chickens, my dear Ted. Besides, Henry really likes it, and why should we deny him any simple pleasures that are in our way?"

Mrs. Spicer chuckled at the expression on Ted's face, but she said, as she rose to go, "I'm glad you're giving more time to your music, Miss Pat. Miriam tells me you've made her take up the violin again.

That's quite as much to the point just now as tending moulting chickens. Bring your music along and we'll have a little concert after the sledding tonight. Your fingers won't be too frosty to find the keys, will they? Miriam can borrow my seal-skin mittens to keep her hands toasting till she gets at the fiddle. Mercy alive, is that quarter to six? I must be on the jump. Good-bye, good-bye. Leave your music contraptions on the way over, and be sure to bring some good lively Christ-massy tunes. Mama and Nathaniel want some songs, too." And then as Patricia started to protest she added quickly, "I know you're not allowed to sing for any Tom, Dick or Harry, but this is *Christmas time.* Bring your songs, my dear; I'll be warrant for breaking the rule this time."

The door had almost closed on her when she opened it again. "The new man will be there," she flung back crisply. "That nice person who's taken Red Top." And she was gone, leaving a breath of the sparkling outdoors air behind her.

CHAPTER II

COASTING AND CAKES

"THERE, now, I think we're ready," said Patricia, surveying the others with dancing eyes. "Miriam, you look too sweet for words in that fuzzy red thing. Have you her violin, Ted? Tom's loaded with music to the eyebrows, poor fellow. I guess Mrs. Nat will have enough to satisfy her this time. Turn out the lamp, Judy, while I run and tell Hannah Ann we're off."

It was within fifteen minutes of the appointed hour and the boys were restless with impatience to get to the meeting place and inspect the sleds. Tom, under his weight of music books, was trying to appear indifferent, but Ted, being at home, was frankly eager to be gone. Miriam in her scarlet skating suit and fuzzy scarf was alight with anticipation, while Judith was so excited she could scarcely attend

to the big yellow lamp on the center of the library table. She had exultingly put on her new outfit, Elinor's Christmas gift, and was absorbed in admiring the warmth and color of the soft green cap, sweater, mittens and scarf, forgetful of even the flight of the precious time.

Two minutes, three minutes went by. Tom and Miriam fidgeted and Ted broke out into open discontent. "What in the world's keeping Miss Pat?" he began, when they heard the pantry door slam and footsteps running through the dining-room.

Patricia with a bag in each hand stood laughing on the threshold.

"Which will you take?" she asked, holding them up gayly. "Both are good, but one's better—Ted, that's not fair! Hannah Ann gave them to me, I tell you. I didn't hook them from the pantry."

Ted in a pretense of righteous indignation had seized one bag and was peering into it, regardless of her protests. His face was one wide grin as he raised it to them.

"Crullers, by Jingo!" he cried gleefully. "Dozens of 'em, too!"

"Sugar buns in this one," said Patricia. "Hannah Ann said she knew we'd be starved long before we got to Spicers' and she didn't want us to disgrace her by 'actin' half fed.' Isn't she an old dear? She always has some excuse for her nice comfy ways. Come along, now, or we'll be late. Miriam'll relieve you of the crullers, Ted, while you lock the door. We're to take the key, as Hannah Ann's going to be out, too, and may be late."

Ted relinquished the precious bag while he locked the hall door and pocketed the key, but he evidently had Hannah Ann's offerings on his mind, for as they went down the terrace steps he halted the party with a peremptory command.

"See here," he said resolutely. "It'll look mighty queer, going into Spicers' to leave the music, all loaded down with grub. Let's stow it in our pockets——"

"No, you don't, old man," laughed Tom. "I'm up to that game. We won't

take chances on its disappearing that way. Think of something easier."

Miriam interposed. "Ted's right," she said firmly. "Mrs. Nat always has a heap of goodies for us, and she'd think we were worse than starved if she saw these bags. We can leave them outside somewhere——"

"I know the very spot," Judith broke in. "There's a round hollow in the arbor-vitæ bushes by the gate, and no one'll ever see the bags there. I often put presents for Mama Shelly there, so it's perfectly safe."

This was satisfactory to all hands, and so they went along chattering gayly of all their plans for the happy holiday week, particularly of the fun just before them.

Patricia was very happy. Her Christmas had been the best she had ever known, since it had found her busy and contented with the life she and Judith and Miriam Halden were living at Greycroft. She had never regretted for one single instant her effort to secure a winter at their charming country home, and although she certainly

did not love the chickens themselves any better than she ever had, the success of the venture they had laughingly dubbed "The Patrick Hennery" was a large factor in her happiness. Her music scholars claimed more of her time now, as the long, dark December days were rather inactive ones for the poultry business, and the care of the little colony rested almost entirely on Henry's willing shoulders. Miriam had proved as satisfying an inmate of Greycroft as she had been a partner in the firm of "Miss Pat & Company, Limited," which was saying a great deal. Judith, having given over treasure hunting, had settled down to enjoy both school and the unabated quest of local tales and anecdotes, and had gained so much in added strength and spirits that both Elinor and Bruce felt that their decision had been a wise one.

The only little flaw in Patricia's felicity had been the briefness of Elinor's stay. She and Bruce had arrived at Greycroft for the holidays with the disappointing news that they were obliged to leave on

the day after Christmas. Elinor's first commission for a stained glass window had come from a nervous, impatient client, and in order to have the work completed in the required time, Elinor had been forced to cut her holidays and go back to execute the cartoon for the glass workers. She had spent the two days before Christmas day in the studio at the top of the house, making studies for the window, while it was Judith's proud lot to pose for the principal figure in the composition, as Ted had noted in the fireside chat before dinner.

The Haldens were still in California, where Mr. Spicer was soon to take his wife and Mrs. Shelly, whose love of travel had not abated one jot since her summer abroad, when she had proved the best sailor and the most contented member of the party. Hiram Todd was in Washington, helping install his collection of minerals in the museum there. The Social House had enjoyed a most flourishing initial season and bade fair to make the Tennis Club the most popular organiza-

tion for many miles about the country. The note of simple friendliness which had been struck on the Donation night, or "The Feast of the Wooden Chairs," as Miriam had dubbed it, had been so successfully kept up that it was a model of good fellowship for less happily disposed clubs and was proportionately valued.

Patricia crunched along in the sparkling snow, watching the little cloud shadows flit across the wide shining reaches of winter white which clothed hill and valley, feeling the sweet, keen air on her rosy face and rejoicing in it all mightily. Coasting was as new to her as to Judith, and she fairly tingled with suppressed delight as, just before they reached Spicers' gate, sounds of gay voices came floating on the crisp air and the jingle of sleigh bells rang merrily from the direction of Dutch Lane.

"Oh, do listen!" she cried, pausing with one pink mitten upraised. "They're all there. Don't the bells sound jolly?"

"They must have a horse-sled," said Miriam, cocking her head eagerly. "Oh, what fun! We won't have to walk up-hill

every time. Come along, Judy. Stuff the bags into those wonderful safety vaults of yours and let's make a bee-line for the spot."

Judith gave a little prance of joy. For once she forgot her beloved Mama Shelly and everything else in the flutter of delight that filled her at those alluring sounds from Dutch Lane. Like a flash she helped Miriam stow the bags of cakes into the hiding place in the bush by the gate, and while Ted held the white paling barrier open for Patricia and the others to file into Mrs. Nat's frosty garden, she caught the hand Miriam held out to her, and skipped out into the rutted, shining roadway.

"We'll wait for you down at the lane," called Miriam gayly as Tom began a remonstrance. "There mightn't be any sleds left if we were too late, you know."

Patricia's ready laugh rippled out at this transparent pretext, but she was too happy to object. She caught the violin case from Ted, and with a little push sent him speeding after the two runaways.

"See after Judy till I come, there's a dear," she said, and Ted needed no better excuse to be swiftly gone.

Tom chuckled at the brisk tattoo of heels on crisp snow as the three sped away into the bright moonlight towards Dutch Lane.

"Seem to have lost their interest in cookies," he said as he lifted the knocker. "They must think we like playing express-man. Serve 'em right if we hooked the stuff—running off from us like that."

Patricia giggled, hopping on the porch with sheer joy of living. "Let's hide them behind that hawthorn bush on the corner of Dutch Lane and pretend we lost them," she suggested. "Then, after they're frightfully, fearfully disappointed and hungry, we can bring them out, like Signor Cappini brought those paper roses out of Mrs. Shelly's muff at the last Social evening."

This appealed to Tom's sense of justice and, after they had deposited their burdens of music and violin case with Mrs. Spicer, together with promises to be punctual in their return, they hurried gayly to the arbor-vitæ bush.

"Won't Ted be disgusted when he hears our sad tale of the loss of those heavenly sugar cakes," rippled Patricia. "What's the matter, Tom? What in the world——"

Tom with his hand far in the hiding place was shaking his head. "They must have come back and swiped them," he grunted. "Pretty low down of them, I call it. There isn't a shred of them left."

Patricia refused to be downcast. "They got ahead of us, didn't they?" she bubbled. "I suppose they'll try to work the same trick on us, stowing them away somewhere and bringing them out later."

Tom pulled his sweater about his ears as he snapped the gate shut behind them. "They'll expect us to make a howl about it," he said, falling into step, "but they'll be good and mistaken. We won't say a thing that sounds like cakes and their joke will fall flat as a flounder. Hark, there's Bert Nelson's horn! I'd know it in a million. He's come all the way from Flatrock again for the Dutch Lane frolic. Come along, Miss Pat, we'll get seats on his corking big bob."

Patricia forgot cakes and comrades and everything she had ever cared for in the delightful agitation of the next few minutes. Tom's cheery hail halted Bert Nelson just as the big sled, half loaded, was about to shoot off down the silvery trail, and in a twinkling the two were packed in behind Bert on the very front of the sled—a favor which was granted Tom as an old acquaintance of the days when Miss Pat's twin had been David Carson and spent all his winter holidays at Rockham. Patricia held her breath as the signal was given and, with a push from one of the boys at the back, the long sled quivered, started slowly down the incline and then plunged into speed on the long descent, flying with swift leaps through the white sparkle of snow and moonshine.

"Oh, oh, *oh!*" she whispered rapturously, unable to find words for her ecstasy.

The hill was full of other smaller sleds, past which they rushed like a meteor, and the roadside was alive with a chatting, laughing throng of coasters walking up or being pulled up the mile-long slope of

Dutch Hill. Overhead, in spite of the moonlight that flooded in full lustre, the bright stars sparkled and snapped in a deep vault of winter blue. The air was crystal clear and laden with the merry shouts of the gay throng, the tinkle of bells on the patient horses and the whirr and crunch of the flying runners.

Patricia had a sensation of leaping out into the tingling whiteness of space, as the sled plunged to its first speed, and then moon and stars, snow and roadway, the other figures on the long hill, even the very sled itself were all lost in a delirious ecstasy of flight such as she had never known before. She drew three deep breaths of the sparkling air, while her heart beat a riotous rhythm in her very throat, and then—it was all over.

The others sprang lightly off as the sled came to a halt, but Patricia, dazed by the intensity of her own feelings, hardly knew that they had stopped. She smiled up radiantly into Bert Nelson's face as he held out a hand to her in response to Tom's word of introduction.

"Isn't it *wonderful?*" she breathed with such intense conviction that both boys laughed.

"I suppose you'd not object to another trip or two, since you feel that way about the sample," said Bert Nelson, much pleased with her appreciation. He was a slow, tawny-haired youth and Patricia's enthusiasm went straight to his heart. The big bob-sled was one of his dearest possessions and Patricia, as a new-comer, afforded opportunity to exploit its advantages over all other sleds of its kind to entirely fresh and unprejudiced ears.

"Indeed, I should love to *live* in it for the rest of my life!" cried Patricia, carried away by the exhilaration of that rapid downward flight. "I never felt anything like it. It's like a—a shooting star," she ended as her eyes caught the twinkle of the skies above her.

"Come along, then," urged Tom. "We've got to walk up this trip. Bert's horse is good for half the trips, but we'll have to use Shank's mare for the others."

They trudged up the long, shining slope

and although a large sled with Ted and the girls on it swept past her, Patricia did not recognize them in the moment they flashed by her. Indeed, she was so completely obsessed by the delightful novelty of coasting that she never thought of them at all until, after the fifth or sixth round on Bert's "Flying Dutchman," as he called the long sled. Tom nudged her as they were waiting for their rear guard to push off.

"There's Ted, waving to us," he said in a low tone. "Bet he's going to work off his little joke as soon as he gets near enough."

Patricia giggled. "I'm ready for those crullers myself," she confessed. "We'll have to hunt him up if he doesn't catch us soon. Oh, look, there's Hiram Todd just back of Judith. He must have come home for Christmas-s——"

The words whistled out of her mouth as the sled sprang to the swift downward flight, and for the next few minutes there was nothing to do save to hold on tight and exult, both of which Patricia did most heartily.

When they were once more toiling up the hill, they were overtaken by another party. Patricia was clutched by an eager hand and pulled aside by Ted.

"Where in creation are the cakes?" he asked, in what she considered a very good imitation of injured innocence. "We've been trying to get our hooks on you for the last half hour. Judy and Miriam are just about ready to begin on their boots—they're that famished."

Patricia eyed him, laughing. "You do it awfully well, Ted Kendall," she said, shaking her head at him. "But it's no use. I know all about it. Tom and I were coming to demand those cakes just as soon as we got within reach of you."

Ted stood still in amazement. "What are you talking about?" he said in real perplexity. "You know we haven't any cakes. We left them in that bush——"

"Yes, and sneaked back and stole them while we were dumping the music stuff in Spicers'," began Patricia, but she stopped at the evident sincerity of Ted's surprise, which was rapidly giving way to genuine wrath.

"Do you think we'd do a poor trick like that?" he demanded warmly. "I must say you've a mighty low opinion of us. Miriam, Miss Pat thinks we swiped the cakes," he explained as the two girls joined them. "She says she hasn't them."

Miriam laughed a little, but Judith opened her eyes very wide in reproach. "Why, Miss Pat, you know Ted wouldn't do such a thing," she urged. "Besides, we hadn't time to go back so far, when you were only in Spicers' for a moment."

Patricia saw the point and seized it, glad to appease her twin's hurt feelings. "Why, of course, you couldn't possibly have done it!" she cried heartily. "Someone else——"

Here Tom, who had fallen back to join the knot, broke in with a cheery "Hand 'em over, old man," and a hand held invitingly out to the still indignant Ted. "Come, deliver the goods. We're too hungry to laugh about it now, but we'll ha ha after we've gobbled some of your loot."

Patricia and Miriam swiftly explained

and Tom's expression was strange to see as the truth burst on him.

"No cakes?" he cried in disgust. "Oh, thunder!"

The girls bubbled with amusement at the two masculine members of their party and Judith broke out into actual peals of laughter at the blank look on both boys' faces.

"You look as though you'd lost your last meal on earth instead of a few sugar buns and crullers," she cried, and then lowering her voice as a tall figure came nearer, she added, "Who do you think took them? It must be someone who knows——"

"Who's talking about crullers and sugar buns?" asked Hiram Todd's nasal tones. "I reckon it's a case of speakin' of angels and hearin' the rustle of their wings," and he held out a stick full of the identical crullers for which Hannah Ann was so justly famous. "Help yourselves," he urged cheerfully. "I reckon there'll be more where these come—*came* from."

There was a moment of stricken silence.

The same thought rushed unbidden into each mind, a thought which each as promptly rejected. Hiram might be queer and, in spite of Miss Pat's careful lessons, still rather uncertain as to grammatical speech, but the theft of their cakes, even in jest, was as impossible to him as it might have been to Mr. Nathaniel Spicer himself.

Hiram misunderstood their hesitation. "Take one," he insisted, holding out the stick to Patricia. "They're famous. Most as good as your hired girl makes, and that's sayin' heaps. Danny Sneath's chargin' twice the regular price, and worth the money at that."

"Danny Sneath!" chorused five surprised voices, and then they all looked at each other for one impressive moment before they burst into a babble of laughing comment.

"I saw him just before we crossed the road by Spicers'," said Judith nodding her head several times. "I suppose he heard us talking about hiding the bags."

"And the little cuss is making money

out of us," cried Ted, with a sort of annoyed admiration of such barefaced impudence. "Did you ever see such cheek? Those Sneaths are the limit."

"Let's go over and scare the gizzard out of him," suggested Tom. "We'll pretend we're going to take him to Squire Jenks. Here, Miss Pat, lend me that round buckle of yours. It looks like a Special's badge——"

"Indeed, you'll do no such thing at Christmas time," said Patricia with great energy. "Those Sneaths are terribly poor, and we oughtn't to begrudge a few cakes that we don't need. Hiram, you won't let them be so horrid, will you?"

Hiram grinned. "I reckon all the scarin' they can do to that young imp won't injure his appetite none—*any*," he said easily. "We can go along to see that they don't get sassed too hard—that's all it'll amount to. That Danny's a terror, and he takes after his dad amazin' for one so young. Hurry if you want to keep up with them."

They hurried after the boys, but much

to Patricia's relief there was no trace of the astute Danny to be found. The crullers and sugar cakes had also almost vanished, Hiram's offering being the last remnant of that goodly array with which Hannah Ann had meant to fortify Mrs. Spicer's hungry young guests.

"Never mind, we'll get him yet," said Ted, as they went back to the groups at the starting place. "I'll get some fun out of that youngster to pay up for this haunting cavern under my belt. What time is it, anyway, Tom? We mustn't keep Mrs. Nat waiting, you know."

They all laughed at this frank intimation of the state of Ted's appetite, but most of them were not so very sorry to learn that a brief half hour was all that remained between them and Mrs. Spicer's good things.

"We'll have some more turns and then I'll take Dapple to the hotel," said Bert, seating himself for another descent. "I'll have to prink a bit before I'm fit for company. I didn't hear about the party at Spicers' till I got here."

Ted was back of Patricia as they went down for the last time and she whispered anxiously to him, as they were starting. "Please don't tease that poor little Sneath boy, Ted dear," she urged. "I'm really awfully sorry for him."

Ted snorted and then gave in. "All right," he promised, as they pushed off. "As long as it's you, and Christmas time, and all, I'll be good. But he doesn't deserve it, honest he doesn't. You don't know him as well as I do, Miss Pat."

Patricia laughed a gay, self-confident little laugh. "Perhaps I know another side to him—or will know it," she said. "People often misjudge little boys like him. They seem bad when they're only shy or restless."

Ted's snort of derision was lost in the glorious plunge into space, and Danny Sneath was forgotten for the moment. Patricia was forming resolutions, however, as they came up the slope to the lane again.

"I'm going to see about that Danny-boy myself," she said to Miriam, as they

went in the white paling gate together. "I've some plans that I think may help make him over."

Miriam was surprisingly indifferent to Patricia's enthusiasm.

"Well, you'll have your hands full," she said carelessly. "He'll need more making over than most anyone I know."

Patricia opened her lips to protest against Miriam's attitude of wet blanket when the light from Spicers' sitting-room shone out a glowing welcome, and Mrs. Nat, with her husband at her elbow and dear little Mrs. Shelly smiling in the background, stood awaiting the guests. A broad-shouldered figure was the first in the doorway, and as Mrs. Nat held out her hand, Patricia gave a little exclamation.

"The man from Red Top," she whispered to Miriam. "We forgot all about him."

CHAPTER III

MR. LONG IS INTRODUCED

TWO chafing dishes were bubbling merrily and the chocolate pot was working overtime, while the dishes of good things both hot and cold were suffering severely, before Patricia, who was helping with one of the chafing dishes, had a chance for a word aside with Mrs. Spicer.

"Do tell me if it's true about Mr. Long?" she said as she stirred the remains of her depleted dish. "Is he really going to turn that splendid Red Top into a tame tabby of a gentleman farmer's place? Ruth Grim told us she'd heard he was going to tear down all those cute little red-roofed poultry houses and build a gorgeous colonial mansion in their place."

"Dear me, child, I don't know much about him or his plans," said Mrs. Spicer absently. "Marian Johnstone brought him

and I haven't said two words to him since he came in. He may be going to put up a Tower of Babel or build an Egyptian sphinx in his back yard for all I know."

Miriam, who had been active at the other chafing dish, slipped around from her end of the table with her empty plate held out to be filled.

"The creamed chicken's most gone, Miss Pat," she warned. "Better not take chances on it. Swap plates and I'll see that you don't get left in the lurch."

Patricia readily yielded her own platter to Miriam while she served her friend with a goodly portion of the remains of the real New England-y baked beans. "I'd hate to think that those dear little houses and all that fine place were going to be torn down," she said earnestly. "I wish Mr. Peberdy had left it in his will that no one should touch it. There isn't another such place in the whole country."

Mrs. Spicer had been occupied with the delicate task of operating the new electric toaster which had been one of Mr. Spicer's Christmas gifts to his wife, together with

a complete household equipment of labor-saving devices, the power for which was rented from the new electric plant of Dr. Brewster who lived next door. It had taken some practice for Mrs. Spicer to be able to substitute the new utensil for the old glowing bed of coals of her kitchen stove, but she had made the most of the brief opportunity since the morning of yesterday and she turned a triumphant face on Patricia and Miriam, who had returned at once with the last of the creamed chicken.

"There!" she said with a nod. "That's as good as any I ever made. Help yourselves while it's hot," and she held out the pretty silver dish heaped with delicious slices of toasted cake, a delicacy to which both girls were very partial.

"This is better than crullers or sugar buns," laughed Miriam, as she followed her friend's advice, and in spite of Patricia's head shake and other signals of disapproval, she told the story of Hannah Ann's donation to the skating party.

Mrs. Nat laughed and then shook her

head over Danny Sneath's sharp practices. Much to Patricia's surprise, she seemed to share Ted's opinion rather than her own more lenient one, as to the neglected spiritual side of that young gentleman.

"They're a hard lot, those Sneaths," she said with a shadow of impatience on her kind face. "I'm sorry they ever came into this village. Dr. Brewster says the oldest girl is down with typhoid and I suppose we'll have to do something for them again, but it's pouring water into a sieve, and a mighty leaky sieve at that. Here, Ted Kendall," she beckoned, with one of her sudden swoops, "take this cake around and ask Mr. Long and Marian to bring their plates over here. There's a nice little table for their cups and we want to get acquainted."

Turning to Miriam, she said, with another crisp nod, "Now we'll see about the colonial house. Miss Pat will have it out of him before you can say Jack Robinson. Put your plates over here, both of you; I'm going to slip off after you're settled. There's just enough room for four."

Marian and Mr. Long were prompt to respond to their hostess' invitation, and after the introductions were over, settled themselves very comfortably at the little table by the abandoned chafing dish. Mr. Long, who was much older than most of the party, was a quiet, sharp-featured young man with an agreeable manner and an air of strength and determination which Patricia liked at once.

He gave her no time to venture toward the subject of the colonial house, however, for almost as soon as Mrs. Nat had joined the group by the fireplace, he turned to her, with a direct look and a pleasant smile which showed his even white teeth under his tiny mustache.

"I believe you young ladies are my only rivals in this part of the country," he said, including Miriam in his glance. "I've been hearing great things about the Patrick Hennery, and I'm hoping I may be allowed to pay it a visit some day soon."

Patricia and Miriam looked at each other in undisguised dismay. "Well, whoever's been telling you great things

about our little one-horse snip of a chicken coop has been fooling you," Miriam burst out. "We've a tiny outfit and we haven't even bought another incubator since the other one burnt up. You don't need to lose any sleep over the Patrick Hennery as a deadly rival, I can tell you that."

Patricia confirmed her chum. "We only went into it for fun, or at least, as an excuse to stay in the country this winter," she said, more seriously. "We've gotten along splendidly so far, but there isn't much prospect of our driving Red Top out of business for a while yet," she ended, dimpling at the absurdity of the mere thought of their little venture as a rival to the model Red Top.

Mr. Long appeared rather surprised and thoughtful. "So it's a small venture and not very profitable, I suppose?" he said rather than asked. "I understood Miss Johnstone to say that you'd made quite a good thing of it."

Patricia raised her eyebrows laughingly. "We're content with mighty little," she returned lightly. "All we've asked of

the Hennery is that it shouldn't cost us too much; and it's been kind enough to comply with our wishes. Nice, polite little Hennery, you see, but not worth mentioning in the same breath with Red Top."

The new owner of the model farm was persistent. "May I come and see this little plant of yours?" he asked with a directness which neither Patricia nor Miriam could evade, although they would have much preferred have let the Patrick Hennery blush unseen by any save their own intimate and tolerant friends.

The consent, so reluctantly given, was accepted by Mr. Long with as much evident satisfaction as though it were the most cordial invitation in the world, and the subject was dropped, much to Patricia's relief, for she was assured by Mr. Long's attitude towards the Patrick Hennery that Red Top was not to be leveled to the ground, and there were a dozen questions she wanted to put to Marian on the subject of the festivities at the Social House during the holiday week.

"Are we to have the New Year masquerade, or a fancy-dress dance?" she asked eagerly. "And when is Mrs. Nat going to have the old-fashioned supper? She said this afternoon she couldn't decide till she saw you and Ruth about the other dates for the week."

Marian told the festivities off on her fingers with great gusto. "Tomorrow afternoon the Tennis Club tea. Tomorrow night the skating carnival. Sunday we're all going about to see each other's trees and presents. Monday the Chautauqua has a tree and party for the poor youngsters of the neighborhood and they've asked us girls to help. Tuesday we have the musical in the evening. And Wednesday the New Year's Eve Masquerade. Mrs. Nat had to take Monday, you see, as it was the only evening left. Have you decided what you'll wear? I simply can't make up my mind to come in calico, and that's the only old-fashioned dress we have in the house."

An eager discussion of the merits of mitts and crinoline, knee-buckles and powder followed, and Mr. Long, in spite of what

Patricia considered his weight of years, took as interested a part as the three girls, and showed a fair amount of taste and knowledge as to the prices and fashions of the bygone days.

"All the same," said Miriam confidentially, as they were leaving the table for the piano and music rack, "I don't like your Mr. Long half so well as I did before he talked so cleverly about the gew-gaws and dew-dabs of those great-grandmothers of his. He's awfully set up over family and all that. He's being polite to us because he likes to show off. Mark my words, Miss Pat, he's not wasting time on us young chits, as he probably calls us, for nothing."

Patricia's sunniest mood was full upon her and she made a laughing face of unbelief at Miriam's critical speech.

"Pooh, you're miffed because his great-great-grandfather came over two years earlier than your celebrated ancestor," she mocked. "You liked him immensely before he set up a taller family tree than yours. You're eaten up with jealousy,

that's what's the matter with you, Miriam, my child. Where are those songs with the obligatos? Oh, here they are. Which do you want to try first?"

Miriam took her violin out of its case and began to tune it carefully.

"Let's have that new arrangement of 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,'" she answered absently. "Mrs. Shelly will like that. I'm right about the Noble Descendant though, and you'll see, if you live long enough."

Patricia shrugged her pretty shoulders, but vouchsafed no further protest, and the music began.

Miriam had a really fine touch, although she had made little use of the many lessons from expensive masters at home and abroad until in the music room at Greycroft she had a new impetus in Miss Pat's ardent love of the best sort of melody. She played tonight with unusual firmness and delicacy, following Patricia's soaring notes with sympathetic understanding. The lovely melody well fitted the inspiring tender words and Patricia's whole soul

flowed out in voice and finger tip, as she caught the rapt eyes of Judith beside the pink-cheeked smiling face of little Mrs. Shelly. Voice and violin and piano in exquisite accord flooded the cosy room with the angel message and thrilled more than one listening heart to a keener memory of that first Christmas carol.

The last notes died away in perfect silence—the best tribute an audience can yield. Then Mrs. Shelly's soft voice said very gently, yet with a brightness that belonged specially to the season:

"I think, my dears, that you have made us all hear the heavenly host a little clearer than we did before. That's the best Christmas song I've heard for many a day."

Judith with her cheeks glowing and her eyes shining spoke out in her high, clear treble, forgetting the others in her fervor.

"Miss Pat & Company ought to go out of the chicken business this very instant. It's a dreadful waste of time for them to be messing about with hot foods and disinfectants and other horrid smelly things."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Mr. Long, applauding warmly. "I endorse Miss Judith's remarks. Nightingales are surely more in their line than common-place biddies."

Patricia swung around on the piano stool and faced her small sister. "Don't set the intelligent public against our products that way, Ju," she laughed. "You mean well, but it sounds unattractive. You'll make the Patrick Hennery unpopular."

Ted raised his voice from the corner where he and Tom were enjoying Hiram Todd's description of his experiences in Washington. "None of you need worry about the firm overworking on the hen proposition," he called. "They might be at the top of the la-la-ladder for all the time they're wasting these days on the egg producers. They've got poor old Henry nailed to the mast, while they gad about enjoying their precious selves."

There was a shout of merriment at this unfeeling revelation, and Miriam nudged Patricia under cover of the noise.

"Do give them the funny one, 'I had

one black cat,'" she said hastily. "That Mr. Long of yours is going to deal out some more compliments and I'd rather hear anything than his nice, smooth, clever comments."

Patricia nodded and dashed into the introduction without the music. "Thanks awfully for the kind words about my poor efforts," she said with a gurgle. "But he isn't my Mr. Long, if you please. Remember that. Now then, take the beat," and she rollicked off into the Irish song with as good a will as any native of the green sod could have wished to hear.

The rest of the evening was gone before they knew it and Mrs. Spicer packed them off home with many injunctions as to being on hand promptly for the club tea the next afternoon.

"We want a big crowd to make things jolly," she said, "so you must all come and bring every nice person you can find, no matter who they are. This is the club's first Christmas in our new house and we want it to be a real good-will week from beginning to end."

After the gate had clicked behind them, Patricia drew a deep, happy breath and smiled mysteriously up at the twinkling, radiant heavens.

"Haven't we had a gorgeous time?" she said, with a quick squeeze of the little green mitten in her own pink clasp. "Coasting's better than I ever imagined, and we had such fun at Mrs. Nat's! Who are you going to bring to the tea tomorrow, Judy-kins? I know who I'm going to try to capture—if I only can."

CHAPTER IV

PATRICIA TRIES TO SKATE

"THEY'RE an absolutely perfect fit," declared Patricia, surveying her shining new skates with great satisfaction. "I do hope I won't be a stupid and take ages to learn how to get about on the ice. I'd like to skate backwards and cut rings and do all sorts of giddy-fying things right bang off!"

Miriam was absorbed in her own problems of strap and clamp, but she laughed at the fervor of hope in her friend's voice. "Don't expect too much of yourself, my dear," she said. "Ice is a mighty slippery proposition when you're not used to it. You'll do more banging than any other fancy figures at first."

The two girls were on the floor in Patricia's pretty lilac bedroom, adjusting their straps and skates with eager haste.

Ted had come in a few minutes before with the news that the ice was as smooth as glass and strong enough for any amount of practice. The little pond in the wood-lot was Greycroft's source of ice for Hannah Ann's refrigerator and was kept strictly private until after the winter crop had been harvested, so there was no chance of spectators to Patricia's first essay of the delights of ice skating, and after adjusting their new skates to sturdy water-proof walking shoes and hustling them into their bags, the two girls pulled on sweaters and caps and hurried off across the snowy garden and orchard to the wood-lot, where Ted and Tom were already skimming about in a most assured and masterly fashion.

"Oh, how jolly it looks!" cried Patricia, ardently, flinging off her scarf and mittens and dumping her skates pell-mell out of their bag while she dropped down on the dam-breast and began to scrape the snow from her shoes before either Ted or Tom could reach her. "How in the world did they make it so lovely and smooth? It

was just a big crust of snow and slush yesterday morning."

Ted had her skates in his hands and was kneeling to adjust them before she finished her joyous outburst. He pointed to the boards nailed fast to the top of the dam-breast, where a thread of water slipped slowly over.

"We raised the pond two inches or so by that dodge," he said complacently. "And the ice is twice as strong as it was before, with this extra coating on it."

"I don't see how you got the water on top of the other ice," commented Miriam, screwing her face as Tom pulled a buckle with energy. "I should think the old ice would have humped up with the rise of the water."

Ted shook his head in pity of her unenlightened state. "See those dark places around the edges?" he asked pointing to several squares of thin ice near the banks of the little pond. "We cut them to let the water through to the top. Don't try any fancy figures over those sections or you'll get your feet wet."

Patricia shivered, although she knew the Dimple Pond was not over three or four feet deep at its best. "Wouldn't it be horrible to fall in and come up under the ice?" she said with a lively picture of such a catastrophe in her mind. "I think I'd simply die of fright at once without waiting to drown."

Ted laughed and gave her shoulder a reassuring pat as he rose. "I guess you won't perish for an hour or so," he said gayly. "You couldn't get under the ice here unless you crawled under."

"But you'll have to be careful tonight," added Tom, who was helping Miriam over the rough, snowy stretch by the edge of the pond. "They flooded the club lake and the air holes there aren't any joke."

"Oh, they'll be fixed up with lanterns and danger signals, don't you fret," said Ted easily. "Johnnie Carr isn't one to let anything like that get past him. Come along, Miss Pat, I'll hold you up till we get out on the real stuff."

Patricia rose shakily and stood for a moment trying to balance on the slender

runners. "Why, how funny it feels!" she said, rather ruefully. "I thought it would be easy, but it's—o-ouch, I'm afraid to lift my feet. There isn't anything to stand on! Hold on to me tight, Ted, or I'll flop!"

Miriam had gained the smooth ice, beginning to glide about in a rather uncertain fashion and Patricia eyed her dolefully. "I'll never, never learn to do that," she lamented, standing stock still. "I might as well make up my mind to help serve the hot things at the carnival tonight, as they wanted me to, instead of trying to keep up with the rest of you. I can't even stand straight," and she gazed reproachfully at her ankles, which were bending first one side and then the other in a very unsteady fashion.

Ted was surprisingly encouraging for a brother, and a brother who could skate well, out for the first time of the season on smooth and perfect ice. He held out an insistent hand. "Come along," he commanded firmly. "You're not going to get out of it that way, Miss. Here,

give me your other hand. Now, that's the jinktum. We'll simply walk to the edge as though we were out for a stroll. Don't try to skate or you'll come a cropper."

Patricia, thus commanded, took heart of grace and stepped with more certainty but with great effort over the rough expanse, while Ted held her firmly when she wobbled and braced her with words of praise at every step.

At the edge of the smooth ice he paused for a moment to let her get breath and confidence. "Watch Miriam and Tom," he recommended. "See how they do it and try to get the hang of it before you start."

Patricia giggled at the comparison of Tom's sweeping slide to her own faltering progress. "I guess Miriam's more my style," she said with a return of her usual spirit. "She's a safer pattern for me yet a while. I wish I could skate like she does. Oh, mercy, what a whack! Do go see if she's hurt, Ted."

Miriam, in her sedate progress about the glassy ice, had come on a twig imbedded

in the surface and just as Patricia voiced her desire to equal her skill on the ice, she stumbled and sat down with a force that made the new ice crack and murmur.

Patricia's concern was shifted to a greater danger as she saw Miriam laughingly hauled to her feet by Tom, who happened to be near.

"How thick is this ice, Ted?" she asked trembling on her unstable footing.

"Oh, about six or seven inches, I should judge," he answered easily. "It was thick enough to cut before we flooded it."

"Six or seven inches!" cried Patricia aghast at the reply. "Do you mean to say it's safe to skate on such thin ice? Why, it's cracking under us all the time. Take me back. I don't want to break through and get soaked!"

Ted shouted with derision at this display of ignorance, and sped off to tell the joke to the other two, leaving Patricia alone for the moment. She watched him glide away with long, even strides, and her indignation at being so deserted took form in the resolve to do something desperate.

Flinging up her head, she struck out in the way she had seen the others do, and before she knew it she was in the middle of the pond, going with breathless haste straight towards Ted and Miriam.

"Oh, I'm doing it!" she cried aloud. "I'm skating. I'm skating!"

Miriam's back was toward her, but Tom and Ted saw her at once, and a hearty cheer went up as they rushed out to intercept her unswerving flight.

"Jiminy, but you're rapid!" laughed Tom, as he glided to one side of her and took her outflung hand. "You're breaking the speed laws, Miss Pat. Take hold of her other arm, Ted, and swing her around. We'll get Miriam, too, and we'll do a round of the pond all four abreast."

Patricia, excited by the sudden success, was wild with enthusiasm. Held up on either side, and with her fright entirely gone, she found the motion of gliding over the smooth ice as delightful as she had ever dreamed, and the exhilaration of the exercise tingled through her veins like an elixir of sparkling life.

"I love it! It's perfectly adorable!" she cried rapturously as they circled the end of the pond, avoiding the air holes and keeping step in perfect unison. "I'm going to simply *live* on this pond while the ice lasts."

Miriam bent forward to fling a laughing question. "Is it as nice as the 'Flying Dutchman'? You were so crazy over that I thought perhaps you'd find skating rather slow."

"Slow!" echoed Patricia, forgetting everything in her eagerness to declare her preference. "Slow, indeed! It's the best fun ever. I'd like to keep on——"

"Look out!" cried Ted, too late.

The same twig, directly in the pathway of their rushing flight, caught at Patricia's skate. Down they went, Patricia in a heap with Ted and Miriam piled beside her, while Tom staggered about, cutting strange figures on the ice in his efforts to save himself from topping the pile.

The others were up in a twinkling, but Patricia laughed till she was too weak to stand and had to be hauled to her feet

by the combined efforts of both boys, while Miriam, whose skate had been wrenched off by the fall, sat placidly on the dam-breast where she had scrambled at once and enjoyed the spectacle.

"Do stand up, Miss Pat," entreated Ted, whose supply of patience was at last growing scant. "You'll never get going again if you wobble about and giggle like that. Here, strike out like you did before. Come," and he tried to steer her out into the course again.

But Patricia, though she laughed, shook her head firmly. "I've had enough for this morning, Ted," she said, buoyantly. "I don't want to get too tired for tonight, or I shan't be able to stir a step on the club lake. I'll go sit on the dam-breast and watch you people. Take off my skates, please, and I'll toddle off and take a good rest till you all are ready to go home."

"I'm ready now," called Miriam. "My heel's torn off and I'll have to get it mended right away. I've had enough practice, anyway. Tom says it's eleven o'clock

and I promised Mrs. Nat to help with the sandwiches for the tea, you know."

Patricia, freed from her skates, found walking, after the usual fashion, a peculiar sensation after her hour on skates, and she floundered over the rough portion to the shore with little shrieks and contortions of mirth.

"Doesn't it feel funny to be on plain everyday feet again?" she said to Miriam, as she gained the big clump of sumacs on the bank. "My shoes feel like logs——"

She broke off, seeing that Miriam was already half-way up the hill to the orchard, intent on repairs and sandwiches, and with a gay wave of her hand to the boys, she started to run after her, smiling to herself over the incidents of the hour.

"If I hadn't gotten my feelings a wee bit hurt I suppose I'd have been standing around shivering yet," she thought, as she hurried through the wood-lot. "If Ted had been sweet and considerate instead of laughing at me, I'd have missed the best of the fun. Pepper is sometimes better than sugar, I suppose."

She gave a little guilty laugh as she recalled her protest against the salutary use of that ingredient in the case of Danny Sneath, but, as she quickly assured herself, that was different. Danny was already suffering, according to her theory, of an overdose of pepper, and what he needed most was a large application of the other treatment. And that application she was determined to apply herself without hindrance or interference from any censorious, critical outsider.

"Poor little chap, he's not half so bad as he's painted," she said half aloud, as she rounded a little green juniper tree that looked particularly fresh and jolly among the sedate faded oaks and hickories of the wood. "He'll have my note by this time. I wonder if—— Oh, mercy, how you scared me!" she cried in surprise as she almost stumbled over the figure of a boy crouched beside the juniper.

The boy had his back to her and he did not stir as she spoke, but Patricia recognized the dingy blue norfolk and the torn corduroys, and her eyes lighted.

"Why, Danny, how nice of you to come so soon!" she cried cheerily. "I'm so glad you got my note in time. Come, shake hands and be friends, won't you? You know I'm not going to hurt you. Get up—do."

CHAPTER V

DANNY SNEATH ACCEPTS WITH PLEASURE

DANNY SNEATH sat up and gazed at Patricia with one suspicious eye, the other being hidden by the low-drawn visor of his old faded cap.

"What d'you want me for?" he demanded cautiously, keeping both fists deep in his trouser pockets and not stirring from the big stone on which he was seated.

Patricia felt she understood his caution. In order to make him more at ease, she seated herself on another boulder nearby and smiled reassuringly at him. "I'm not going to rush him or he'll get scared and run away," she thought, glowing with satisfaction over her own sagacity in dealing with the young miscreant.

Aloud she said with all the bright confidence she could show in eyes and lips, "I'm sorry you had to take our cakes last night, Danny, but I've heard since

then how much you needed the money." At the mystified expression on Danny's face she became more explicit. "I know your sister is ill and you felt that you ought to help, even though you did very wrong in taking other people's property. I wanted to tell you how sorry it made me to have you steal—yes, Danny, that's the ugly word for it—to steal our cakes, but I wanted to say, too, that I am going to try to make it so that you'll never want to do such a dreadful thing again. Do you know what I mean, Danny?"

The boy, who had been following her words with varying expressions on his thin, sharp face, looked alarmed and shook his head stubbornly.

"You ain't goin' to have me pinched, are you?" he demanded in a slow, gentle voice that was curiously at variance with his reputation for roughness. "I didn't see no constable about and you——"

"Horrors, no!" cried Patricia, shocked at such an idea. "Of course, I'm not. Didn't I promise to help you if you came to see me? Don't be a silly, but listen to what I say."

Danny, much relieved, sank back on the stone, from which he had started in undisguised anxiety, and his wide blue eyes shone with a new light, which Patricia attributed to gratitude. "All right," he said jauntily. "I'm listenin'. Fire away."

Patricia was hardly prepared for such easy manners from one whom she was so befriending, but she was prepared to overlook much in the degenerate Danny, and besides, she argued, he probably knew no better. So with kindling eyes and voice actually trembling with eagerness, she bent forward and held out her hand once again across the space that separated them.

"We're going to be famous friends, Danny," she said brightly. "And we must shake hands on it before I tell you all the nice things I am going to do for you."

She made a very pretty picture in her pink out-of-door clothes with her golden hair blowing about in little shining tendrils, and the heart of Danny Sneath was somewhat moved toward confidence. He put out one chapped and grimy paw for Patricia

to shake and, wagging his head resentfully, he muttered, deep in his thin chest:

"Howdy do. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year," and then was promptly overcome with shame at such un-Sneath-like weakness. He pulled his hand from Patricia's warm grasp and sat up very straight on his big stone, with all his former impudence returning. "Now we're friends, I guess," he said with a slow grin wrinkling his freckled cheeks. "Let's have the rest of it. Them guys down to the pond 'll be buttin' in after a bit."

Patricia swallowed her slight feeling of indignation at his pertness and spoke very gently as she counted off the items of her proposed contract on her fingers.

"I am going to forgive you tak—stealing our cakes," she said, inwardly approving her own sternness, "and I'll ask you to help me in return. First of all, you must promise not to steal anything again. If you need money—for medicines or food or anything like that—you must tell me." Danny's eyes opened wide at this. "Then, I am going to give you some nice clothes, if

you will go with me to the tea party at the club this afternoon—no, don't interrupt. Wait till I finish. And I'll promise to see that no one hurts you or that you aren't hungry or cold or—or—anything like that, if you will behave nicely and be a real friend of mine. How does that strike you, Danny? Do you think you'd like to sign the contract?" she ended with a sunny smile that almost disarmed the ever-suspicious Sneath.

" 'Tain't bad," he conceded grudgingly. He was not going to show too much of his real feelings to this strange girl, or she might get the better of him in some unknown fashion. "Sounds all right—'cept that part about the party. I ain't goin' to no party. They wouldn't let me in," he explained with an earnestness which Patricia found pathetic. "I guess you don't know me. I'm bad," he ended simply, stating the fact with calm finality.

Patricia's eye filled. "Oh, but you're going to be good after this!" she cried eagerly. "And you shall go to the party. You shall have some nice clothes and go

with me and I'll see that no one hurts your feelings or even looks at you——"

He interrupted her with puzzled patience. "Them kids that go to tea-parties is soft," he said. "I got lots of muscle, even if I do look skinny. And I ain't goin' to lose my heft for any old clothes or—or—"

It was Patricia's turn to break in. With a merry laugh at his fear lest the tea party might impair his muscle, she explained that one indulgence in such ladylike entertainments could not possibly injure his prowess, and further, that this particular tea party was especially designed to welcome all sorts and conditions of people, with muscle and without, to the decked and garnished Social House in memory of the peaceable message that came to all men on that first Christmas night.

"So you see, you must not think so much about your muscle as about being gentle and kind," she said firmly. "You'll have a good time, never fear. And there'll be lots of nice things to eat, sandwiches and cakes and candy, too."

Danny's eyes sparkled at this inviting

description, and he showed his first real interest. "They won't let me have none," he fenced with a gleam of underlying hope in his denial. "They'd chuck me out if I'd nip a sandwich, I bet."

Patricia assured him that he should have all that he could possibly hold and even some to take home, if be behaved well.

Danny capitulated at once, with a deep sigh of rapture over the prospect of so much freedom. "I'll go," he promised readily. "And I'll act like a baby with blue ribbons on it—see if I don't. Say, are there any more feeds goin' to be pulled off that you want me to be at? I don't mind if I go to a whole lot—just to please you."

Patricia rippled merrily. "One at a time, Danny," she replied hurriedly as she saw Ted and Tom preparing to take off their skates. "Now, run off quickly. But be sure to come as I told you, at half-past one. And don't let anyone see you if you can help it. I want to get you all nicely dressed up before the others get a glimpse of you."

Danny seemed to share her wish for secrecy, and he nodded approval. "I'll be

on the side porch and you can sneak me in slick as grease," he said hastily as he rose. "I'll be there sure as shootin'. So long," and he was off like a shaft of light, vanishing as easily among the gray tree-trunks as any wild thing might have gone.

Patricia sat for a moment staring at the place he had disappeared, a happy smile on her pink lips and the light of unselfish kindness radiating her fresh young face.

"I do believe he's going to be worth while," she said softly to herself. "Oh, won't it be lovely to show Ted and Miriam and—yes, and Mrs. Nat, too—that they've been mistaken in the poor little fellow."

She rose and began slowly to make her way homeward over the crackling crust of the deep snow carpet. "He *is* a bit discouraging it first," she said thoughtfully, with the memory of her new acquaintance's pert manner recurring rather painfully. "But he'll improve rapidly, I know. He's too sharp to be slow about anything. I wonder what Hannah Ann will think about my giving away those old things of Bruce's without telling her first?"

This disturbed her only a second. "Pooh, she ought to be glad that any boy would wear such old-fashioned things," she defended herself. "They're years and years old. It's a mercy that Bruce always wore norfolks and knickerbockers, even in those dark ages. "I must trot along and get them out of that big cedar chest in the lumber room and see what they look like. I haven't laid eyes on them since we first came to Greycroft, nearly two years ago. I suppose I'll have to get some collars and other things at the store. I do hope Danny will behave. He's a good-looking little shaver, for all his half-starved look. It's going to be great fun to fix him up."

CHAPTER VI

THE GOOD-WILL TEA PARTY AT SOCIAL HOUSE

"NOW, Danny, don't forget that you are to say 'thank you' when anyone gives you anything, and 'if you please' when they ask you to have more, for you're to eat all you want, you know," said Patricia, earnestly. "I wish you could remember the other things I've told you, but I suppose that's asking too much," and she sighed wistfully.

Danny was very satisfactory. "Sure I can remember them things about openin' doors for the ladies and sayin' 'pardon *me*' when I act the chump. And bowin' like this when I'm interdooced. Watch me if you think I'm lyin'——"

"Oh, don't use such horrid words, please," implored Patricia. "No nice person says such things. Say 'telling untruths' or 'prevaricating.' I never could stand it if you talked like that."

Her young charge opened his blue eyes at this piece of affectation on the part of his benefactress, but he grinned his slow, wide grin at her distressed face. "Sure, I'll say anything you ast me," he promised smoothly. "I'm goin' to be a reg'lar little gentleman, I am, and that's no—pervaricatin', I tell you. See how I can bob," and he bowed gravely at an imaginary introduction in a fashion that set Patricia's anxious mind at rest.

At this last moment, when she had evaded Miriam and the others, and was on the point of escorting her new protégé to the Peaceable Tea-fight, as Ted called it, her mind misgave her, and the plan which had seemed so brilliant a demonstration of the spirit of the happy season suddenly became a rather doubtful one. She wondered if she had not have better chosen some other moment for the espousal of Danny's cause than the present gay and social hour of pretty clothes, light chat, and dainty cheer. Danny's appearance as he rose and bowed, however, set her fears at rest and she smiled down on him with

a good will that was worthy of the season.

"You look very nice indeed," she allowed herself to say, while she strove to keep the exultation out of her voice. "If you only behave as well I'll be proud of you."

Danny in a brown norfolk suit of Bruce's boyhood, with a blue tie matching his pensive eyes and a white stiff circle of immaculate collar under his pointed chin, looked at himself in the long mirror in the gray room where Miss Auborn had spent part of a summer and where Patricia had smuggled him directly after his successful entrance at the appointed time.

"I'm some guy in this rig," he said, admiring the polish on the shoes which, with the collar and tie, had been hastily purchased from the store. "I bet they'll take me for some doggone millyionaire. Bet old Long-legs 'll open his eyes when he sees what folks I'm travelin' with now."

Patricia was stooping to recover a dropped glove and she did not catch all of his speech, but the name arrested her attention.

"Do you know Mr. Long?" she asked, as she opened the door and motioned to Danny to precede her. She was enthusiastic about her young friend, but she still retained enough caution to keep him well in sight, lest he relapse into his degenerate ways before he was well out of them. "Have you been at Red Top since he bought it?"

She felt as soon as this was spoken that it was not the most fortunate speech she might have made, since she knew perfectly well that Danny's father and Danny's own self had both been ordered off the place under circumstances rather to the disadvantage of the Sneath family by old Mr. Peberdy, the former owner of Red Top, just before his death.

Danny, however, felt no sting of memory. "Yes, I've seen him down there," was all he vouchsafed. "He's a queer guy. You've seen him, ain't you? Peaky sort of a nose and top-lofty way of lookin' at you, like this," and he imitated Mr. Long's direct gaze so cleverly that Patricia had all she could do to keep her face straight.

"Come, come, you must not make fun of people like that," she admonished. "No one likes an impudent boy, and that's impudence, whether you understand it or not. Here, wait till I see if the coast's clear. We don't want to run into anyone till we get to the Social House, if we can help it."

The way was clear and they went out the side door and by way of the screening shelter of the hedge, they passed through the shrubberies and so into the road without detection from Hannah Ann. Patricia was jubilant as they gained the gate of the Social House without encountering anyone save near-sighted Mrs. Kram, who could not have recognized her own daughter a dozen steps away.

"Here we are, Danny," she whispered as she laid her hand on the knob of the door. "Take off your hat and bow nicely when we go in. *Now*," and she swung the door wide for their entrance.

The hum of voices which had sounded so insistently while they stood on the step, burst on Patricia's ears with the noise of thunder as she stepped into the hall with

the reconstructed Danny by her side. For a moment the whole scene swam before her in a daze of uncertainty and she caught her breath sharply.

She heard the volume of happy chatter grow up to the exclamation point of wonder and surprise, and then, for one chilling fraction of a second, halt and fall into deathly silence.

Patricia never knew how she got through that infinitesimal fragment of time, until the hum took up its burden of merry sociability again and the babel went on as before.

She felt that she must have shown the agitation she was undergoing, but Miriam, who met her in the moment of entrance, told her afterwards that she looked "as cool as a cucumber and twice as pretty." Danny, entirely unconcerned, strolled in by her side, looking right and left with an expression of gentle satisfaction at finding himself in such goodly company.

Miriam tried to hide the genuine amazement she felt under a demonstrative manner. She welcomed Patricia as warmly as though she had been an unknown and distinguished

guest, shaking hands with her in the most formal fashion.

"It's awfully good of you to come," she found herself saying, when the joke of her attitude burst on them both at once and Patricia rippled her merry peal in unison with Miriam's gurgle of mirth. "Oh, what a goose I am!" she cried, recovering herself a little. "I was so struck of a heap, as Hannah Ann says, by your guest, Miss Pat, that I didn't think what I was saying. Introduce me, will you? I've seen the gentleman before, I think, but I've never really met him."

Danny, who knew perfectly how many times Miriam and her sister had chased him from their orchards and garden, bowed in the way that Patricia had so hastily taught him, and said very gravely in his smooth, slow speech: "It's awfully good of you to be interdooced, Miss Halden," imitating Miriam's first manner with such close mimicry that even Miriam could not fail to recognize her set speech of welcome.

Her ready laugh bubbled out and she eyed Danny with a changed look.

"Charmed to meet you, Mr. Sneath," she parried gayly. "May I offer you some tea or chocolate? Or are you going to make the tour of the rooms?" she asked Patricia, who was looking eagerly about her.

"Oh, I think we'll see Mrs. Nat first," returned Patricia uneasily. "I see she's with Mrs. Shelly and Judy in the tea-room. We might as well have it over at once. Come, Danny, we'll postpone refreshments till we've been about a bit."

Danny drew his heels together again and bent his curly head in a lower bow than before. "It's awfully good of you to ask me to eat," he said with great enjoyment of his performance. "Charmed to meet the feed after she's through," and he indicated Patricia with a turn of his stubby thumb.

Miriam was delighted. Always ready for any sort of fun, she saw alleviation for the comparatively dull work of shaking hands with the incoming guests and wishing them the greetings of the day.

"Stay with me while Miss Pat goes and talks to those people," she said, detaining him as they were about to move off. "I'll

take good care of him, Miss Pat," she promised in answer to Patricia's anxious look. "Run along and have a good time. There are hosts of people who've been asking for you. Ruth wants to see you about tonight. Better see her first," and she gave Patricia a little push toward the corner where Ruth was holding a consultation with Hiram Todd and Marian Johnstone.

Patricia was well enough pleased to shift her responsibility in such easy fashion, and after murmuring some words of caution in the ear of the acute Danny, she moved off, feeling strangely light-hearted and free.

The rooms were crowded with people from the surrounding country as well as from the neighborhood, and Patricia had many acquaintances among them. Her sweetness of manner and her impetuous gaiety made her a welcome addition to every group and her progress toward Ruth's corner was so slow that Mrs. Spicer and Judith had been settled there some time before she reached it. A perfect babel of questions and comments greeted her and the name of Danny Sneath was in every one of the

sentences hurled at her, as she stood half laughing and wholly perplexed before the excited group.

"What *are* you all talking about?" she asked as soon as she could make herself heard. "Danny's behaving like a perfect cherub. Miriam's crazy over him and begged to have him stay with her. I don't see what you're making such a fuss about."

Mrs. Nat was the first to make herself heard distinctly. "You've brought a regular hornet's nest about your ears by choosing that young scamp as an escort, my dear," she said with a puzzling light in her pale, kind eyes. "Almost everybody in the crowd has some old score to settle with your precious Danny and it's only the Christmas spirit that saves him."

She watched the effect of her words on Patricia narrowly, and a pleased look came over her face as Patricia flung up her head defiantly and said with a rush of added color to her cheeks:

"I don't care in the least if they all make fun of me. I think it's a pity if grown-up people can't forget and forgive once in a

while, particularly when it's a neglected, starved, abused child that they're all arrayed against. I'll go get Danny from Miriam and he shan't stir from me the rest of the afternoon. If they don't want to be nice to him they needn't expect to talk to me again."

She was marching off in great indignation at the lack of human kindness in the breasts of the holiday throng about her, when she was halted by Mrs. Nat's voice.

"Don't forget that it might be kinder to Danny not to make him too conspicuous," she said warningly. "He's bound to be snubbed if you push him too hard."

Hiram and Ruth added some other caution which Patricia was in no mind to heed and she left them without further ceremony, hurrying over to the post near the door where she had left Miriam and Danny. Judith, tugging at her elbow, could scarcely get her attention, but when she found the place deserted and neither of those she sought anywhere in sight, she turned a more willing ear to her small sister's repeated whispers.

"Miss Pat, do listen," urged Judith. I've been trying to tell you all along, but you're so *pervicacious*—Miriam's having Danny help her serve chocolate, and lots of people are awfully shocked. Mrs. Hand's perfectly scandalized, she says, that such a little reprobate should be allowed in a respectable house. She said right out to Danny that she hoped he wouldn't be making off with anything *this* afternoon."

Patricia stood still, with a lump of ice in her throat. All the joy which she had felt over her righteous deed changed to misery. She saw herself in a new light—that of trying to force her own point of view on older and more experienced people. She did not care in the least for Mrs. Hand's opinion, since that gentle-spoken lady was not generally regarded as a model of unselfish kindness by any who knew her; but she realized how presumptuous she must seem in the eyes of people like the kindly, cultured Halls or the decorous Mrs. Hod Myers, when even tolerant Mrs. Nat herself thought it necessary to try to check her, lest she further over-step the bounds of propriety.

The lump of ice turned hot as she glanced swiftly around and marked the ripples of amusement that were eddying about her. All her spirit of defiance was gone as she caught Judith's arm under her own and demanded, choking over the words:

"W-who else did Danny have trouble with? Mrs. Hand doesn't count—she's always fussing over things."

Judith's voice was rather too sympathetic to be quite comfortable. "He was awfully impudent to Mr. Long, although he didn't say anything. He just stuck up his chin and looked like a perfect imp when Miriam gave him the cup for Mr. Long. And do you know, Miss Pat," Judith's tones sank to a horrified whisper, "Hiram Todd told me that Mr. Long had caught him making off with some of his best chickens this very morning. He had them done up in a bag in a bundle of corn fodder and he wouldn't give them up at first. He said he wanted to buy the fodder and he even flung down three cents and ran off with the bundle. But Mr. Long had heard about him, Miriam said, and he caught him, and he found the

chickens inside almost smothered to death. What do you think of that?"

Patricia did not say what she thought of it. She hardly knew herself how to reconcile Danny's light-hearted mimicry of the man he had so lately wronged with his evident sincerity in regard to his contract with her. Her mind was in that turmoil which seeks instant outlet, and so she pounced on the first to her hand.

"Mr. Long might have known they were almost starving, now that his sister is so ill," she retorted. "And Danny couldn't be expected to realize the difference between blooded stock and plain, every-day chickens. I suppose he was too hungry to think what he was doing."

"He had all those nickels he charged for our cakes last night," Judith reminded her, hesitating to add what Patricia had evidently forgotten, that the Tennis Club's donation of a generous Christmas feast to the undeserving Sneaths could scarcely have been exhausted so soon, even by the most voracious brood.

Patricia sighed as she resolutely made her

way through the chatting groups in search of her difficult protégé. The good-will tea was not proving much of a success as far as she was concerned and she heartily wished she had not chosen the rôle of reformer quite so openly.

She had a positive shock when she at last discovered the object of her mortification entirely at his ease as the center of a hilarious little group about the table where Miriam's chocolate pot was simmering. Mr. Long and Tom Hughes were laughing at some speech of Danny's as Patricia joined them and she caught the nonchalant tone of her young charge as he answered some question that had been put.

A great wave of relief swept over her and she could have sung songs of thanksgiving to each member of the amused group, but she firmly insisted on annexing Danny at once and escorting him out of reach of further harm.

"I'm going to take you home now," she said resolutely. "I think it must be time for you to help with the night-work."

Danny, recognizing the inevitable in her eye, nodded cheerfully. "I've et more'n a dozen of them aye-clairy things," he motioned to the pastry tray which had a ravaged appearance, "and she's given me six of them fizzy cups"—indicating Miriam's bowl of whipped cream—"and I'm full as a tick. Gee, but parties is fun! You better get a gait on for that blow-out of your'n," he added airly to the amused Mr. Long. "I ain't goin' to make any other engagements till I hear from you."

There was the smoothest of insolence in his gentle, drawling tone, and Patricia, in her changed mood, could gladly have shaken him heartily. But she merely hurried him off with scant ceremony, cutting short his formal farewell bows and speeches and getting him out into the frosty twilight with all possible despatch.

"How could you act so to Mr. Long?" she asked as she reached the corner where she intended leaving him. "You know how good it is of him to even talk to you—let alone joking and laughing at your silly speeches."

Danny was unimpressed. "Oh, him?" he said opening his drooping blue eyes to their widest in innocent surprise. "Why, he *likes* me, now. He was fit to chew me up till he found out that you and Miss Miriam was takin' me about and then he sung small, I tell you. He'd let me borrow his best boots, I bet—he's that set on bein' nice to you two girls."

Patricia flushed with annoyance at this freedom on Danny's part, but she merely said, rather severely:

"Little boys shouldn't talk about grown-up men that way, Danny. Now run home and tell your mother all about it. Come over tomorrow morning for your old clothes. I want to see you then."

Danny promised easily enough and Patricia watched him scamper off through the gathering twilight with a feeling of a burden rolled away.

"Now, I'll go back and have a good time," she breathed, skipping a little in her rising spirits. "Thank goodness, I haven't anything to worry about for the rest of today. The carnival is going to be heaps of real,

simon-pure fun. Oh, I do hope I can manage to keep up on my skates. It's going to be glorious moonlight, too."

CHAPTER VII

PATRICIA SEES THE CARNIVAL

"WHERE'S Miriam?" asked Ted of Patricia as he knelt to strap her skates.

The carnival was at its height.

The little club house, a field beyond the artificial lake which had been made in the meadows back of the tennis courts, was ablaze with lights and a lane of torches flung their ruddy glare all along the path which led from the house to the rustic shelter by the lake. A big bonfire on the farther bank sent its cheery light flickering gayly over that end of the smooth ice, while lanterns and torches vied with the flood of brilliant moonlight which glistened over field and meadow. All about the pond, poles with lanterns swung to their summits showed the dark squares of the lightly frozen air-holes, while placards in huge black letters warned the skaters against these pitfalls.

Groups of gayly clad girls and young men skimmed the smooth surface of the flooded pond with varying degrees of skill, while the small boys whose relationship to club members gave them admission to the carnival were everywhere at once. Throngs of laughing members who either had not the proficiency or the desire to be on the ice, tended the big fire, looked after the flaring lane of torches, or served hot lemonade or coffee from the glowing stove in the rustic shelter. Everywhere was motion and laughter and happy faces.

Patricia had spent the first half of the hour helping Mrs. Spicer establish herself and her belongings in the shelter, preparatory to serving the hot beverages, and she had the pleasure of knowing that her friend approved, if not of her rashness in introducing Danny before completing his reform, at least of the spirit in which she had made the effort to realize the good-will of the season. It had been a great relief to her to have Mrs. Nat's pale eyes look on her with their kindliest look and to hear her say, with her deep chuckle:

"It's a good idea that you have in that curly head of yours, my dear, and you may count on me to back you every time—except when you try to insist on my admiring a little white lamb, when all the while I can see the black wool of that bad sheep sticking out boldly under the edge of your whitewash, as it did this afternoon."

Patricia had laughed and admitted that she had, perhaps, been too hasty in presenting Danny to public notice, but she was not prepared to back down on her former assertion that he had a better side which she was determined to bring to the surface. And Mrs. Nat had pinched her glowing cheek and with another deep chuckle had sent her off to enjoy herself with the rest of the skaters.

Ted's question surprised her. "Why, she's out here with Tom, isn't she?" she said in surprise. "I saw him putting on her skates long ago over by the bonfire."

As she spoke Miriam, with Hiram Todd on one side and Tom on the other, went gayly past, waving an eager welcome to Patricia, who waved in reply.

"We'll catch up to them on their way back," said Ted, helping her to her feet. "We'll have to have another run like we did this morning, eh, Squibs, old girl?"

Patricia, balancing with more security than she had expected, nodded brightly. "I do believe I can do lots better tonight," she said, much pleased at her steadiness of footing. "I almost think I could skate by myself if I tried."

"Better not risk it," warned Ted, taking a firmer hold of her arm. "Hello, here's old Long making a bee-line for us. Jiminy! he's some skater, isn't he?"

Mr. Long whirled up to them with the utmost grace, and after the greetings and comments on the success of the carnival were over, he offered to take the vacant post at Patricia's right until she should find a better support.

Patricia accepted with great readiness. She liked Mr. Long and could not account for Miriam's aversion to him. His promptness in accepting Danny had won her gratitude, while her admiration of the splendidly equipped farm he had recently come

into possession of at Red Top made her eager to "talk chicken," as Ted expressed it. She made the most of her opportunity as they made several rounds of the lake and the topic proved so interesting that she pursued it eagerly after she was too tired to go further and they sat down on one of the many benches around the edge of the lake, while Ted went off in search of less practical conversation.

Mr. Long was insisting on paying a visit to the Greycroft colony on the very next morning, when a call for him came from the club house and he was forced to hurry off, leaving Patricia sitting by herself in the rather retired corner of the pond where they had been resting.

Patricia looked about her in great enjoyment. The bright moonlight, the hurrying groups of skaters, the merry sound of steel ringing on ice, all thrilled her with lively satisfaction. She was glad to be apart from it for a brief while.

"It's like looking at a play," she told herself, smiling at the gay scene. "I'm glad they're all keeping over to that other

side for a while. I can see so much better with this distance between us."

The throng had for some reason unknown to Patricia moved to the end of the lake nearest the Social House and the lighted lane of torches, and the portion where she sat was deserted save by an absorbed couple just across the pond and another solitary figure on a bench a short distance away. In the uncertain light she did not recognize the girl who was fumbling with her skate strap and apparently quite unconscious of Patricia.

A sudden desire to try her own skill recurred and she rose confidently. "I'll see if I can get along by myself after all," she thought. "Just to show Ted how rapidly I'm learning."

She started off with surprising ease, her feet gliding with accurate strokes over the glassy surface and carrying her with increasing swiftness straight ahead. She fairly laughed aloud at the rapidity of her progress, and the sound made the solitary girl start and turn her head. Patricia was too intent on her own affairs to notice the girl

at all, and she swept on, growing more elated with every stroke of her steely runners.

"Oh, it's perfectly glorious—" she began, when her heart leaped into her mouth and she gave a sharp little cry

Directly in front of her and almost under her swift feet lay one of the dangerous black squares unmarked by lanterns or placard!

It was too late to save herself by turning aside and she had no skill to arrest her flight. Straight into the icy blackness she crashed, splintering the thin covering into a thousand diamond points in the moonlight and making the peaceful air ring with her agonized cry.

Between the moment when she saw her danger and the next when her skates struck the bending new ice, she had time to recall Tom's words about the depth of the dark water beneath her hurrying feet and to realize how far she was from the help she so desperately needed. There was an eternity of wild, uncontrolled fear as the ice broke beneath her weight and she sent

out another ringing cry from the very depths of her shaken consciousness.

She made a futile clutch at the edges of the thicker ice as she went down and then she grew suddenly calm as the water rushed up about her.

"I'll hold my breath and try to be brave, like Aunt Louise would have been," she thought swiftly, with the picture of that grave, high-bred face of the portrait in the Greycroft library rising vividly before her in the dimness and flurry of her emotions.

Then the black, swallowing water engulfed her and she lost all sense of time and space in the icy rush of her swift descent into the swirling depths of the tugging undercurrent.

CHAPTER VIII

PATRICIA'S VOW

WHEN Patricia came to herself she was swathed in blankets and lying propped against Mrs. Spicer's knee in the rosy warmth of the rustic shelter with Dr. Griggs' keen eyes looking critically into hers.

She had a sense of bruised soreness from the rolling which her body had undergone while she was yet unconscious and her head was humming; but the endeavor to live up to the high standard she had set before her in the moment of her disaster remained strongly with her.

She smiled up into the anxious faces which crowded closely above her and tried to speak gayly, though her voice shook in spite of her.

"How warm and lovely it is," she said, gazing at the flicker of the torches to avoid the array of agitated faces. "And how

perfectly *beautiful* you all look, after that—" her voice failed and she shut her eyes to hide the tears that would overflow, cuddling back against Mrs. Nat's strong arm and hiding her moist, curly head on that firm, tender shoulder.

Mrs. Nat patted her gently and the doctor motioned to the others to move back a space. "She'll be all right now," he said briskly. "Some of that hot lemonade and more warm blankets is all she'll need. I'll be off to my other patient," and catching up his bag of useless instruments he hurried out, buttoning his great-coat.

Mrs. Nat held Patricia close while she superintended the preparations for taking Patricia home. "Nathaniel, my dear, if the sleigh has come from Greycroft you might see that the rugs are arranged and everything ready. We must get this poor child home as soon as possible. Tom and the doctor will take care of Miriam. Here, Ted, take these hot-water bottles, and, Hiram Todd, you're the strongest, hold Miss Pat up, will you? She might as

well be carried comfortably, since she's rather weak and shaky from her dipping."

The jingle which had announced the sleigh ceased abruptly and Hannah Ann, with her hood awry and her face white, rushed into the shelter.

"Where's my precious lamb?" she demanded, completely beside herself with distress. The ruddy firelight showed her tight-clenched hands and blazing eyes and revealed the workings of her tense mouth.

As she saw the wrapped and blanketed form in Mrs. Nat's arms she gave a cry of inarticulate pain, and bending quickly, she lifted the sobbing Patricia in her own strong arms and, raising her easily, she carried her out into the moonlight and placed her tenderly in the sleigh among the warm wraps and hot-water bottles. She spoke not another word, but motioned mutely to Mrs. Nat to take the place beside Patricia, while she slipped into the seat beside the driver and at her grim nod, the sleigh sped away with a merry jingle of silvery bells, leaving a subdued and astonished group behind it.

Patricia, as she huddled down into the cosy warmth, caught a glimpse of the circle of faces before the sleigh shot off. Judith and Ted were among the foremost, and near them Ruth Grim and the tearful countenance of Marian Johnstone. Patricia wondered idly why Marian should be so affected when little Judith's eyes were dry, and then her mind cleared rapidly, and she turned to Mrs. Nat with a bewildered question.

"But where is Miriam?" she asked in surprise. "And Tom, too? Has anything happened to them?" Her voice sharpened with sudden fear. "Oh, tell me, please, that they aren't drowned, too."

Mrs. Nat put a comforting arm about her and held her close. "No, they aren't drowned," she replied soothingly. "And Tom's all right. Miriam's only had an accident. No, she isn't seriously hurt," she said quickly in reply to Patricia's stifled cry of dismay. "She fell on the ice trying to push the bench over to you and she's sprained her ankle or broken it, we don't know just which. She's safe

with Tom and the doctor at Greycroft by this time, where you'll see her in two shakes of a lamb's tail. It's lucky she was near enough to see you making for that air-hole, or you mightn't have gotten through so well. Everyone else had gone to gape at Danny Sneath doing fancy figures bold as brass right in front of the biggest torch! I think Mr. Long might have done better than to take up with that young imp."

"Mr. Long!" echoed Patricia in genuine astonishment. "Why, he was with me just before I started out for myself—" she shivered again. "I thought he was called home by a message."

Mrs. Nat gave a sniff. "Message from home!" she echoed in scorn. "Not a bit of it. It was that cheeky young Danny, sending in to ask if he mightn't come in for a minute. You see, Miss Pat, what a train you've laid, bringing that imp into decent people's houses. You wouldn't have been left alone and the pond all deserted if Danny Sneath hadn't been at the bottom of it."

Patricia was still too dazed to be much affected by this logic. Her mind was on Mrs. Nat's words about her chum. "Was that Miriam on the bench near me?" she asked. "Why, I never knew it was she. Why didn't she come over and skate with me, instead of moping by herself?"

"She was resting, just as you were," replied Mrs. Nat. "She didn't recognize you either until you laughed. And the next moment she saw you go sliding into the air-hole. She pushed her bench out to you, but you'd gone down and there was nothing but water in the hole. She got the ice broken with the bench before any of the others could get there and when you came up, she grabbed your scarf and held on till Ted pulled you out. Then she turned limp as a rag and we found she'd hurt her ankle. Tom rushed her off home while we were busy with you."

Patricia was in a whirl of emotion. "Oh, Hannah Ann," she cried, trying to squirm about in her wraps to see more clearly the face behind her. "Did the

doctor come? And what did he say? Is Miriam all right?"

Hannah Ann, still very white and haggard, but with more of her customary grimness, shook her head. "Didn't stop to see the doctor," she snapped. "I reckon she'll live through it, anyway. Twisted ankles aren't apt to kill. You can see for yourself in two shakes. We've broke the record this trip. Here we are and thank goodness for it, I say."

The sleigh stopped at the side door of Greycroft as she spoke, and she clambered out with an agility that was amazing in one so rigid. She flung away the wraps and took Patricia in her arms as she had done before, and, nodding to Mrs. Nat to follow, she stalked into the house, up the stairs and laid Patricia, all bundled up as she was, in the big easy chair in her own lilac bower.

There was a fire crackling on the hearth, and a smell of hot, steaming beverages in the air, and Henry with a covered pitcher and a formidable array of hot-water bottles appeared in the opposite doorway. Hannah

Ann had not been losing any time while she was on her mission to the carnival.

Henry, before he disappeared, reported the doctor still with Miss Miriam, and Patricia eagerly implored someone to go at once and see what his verdict was. Hannah Ann refused to budge, so Mrs. Nat, with a sly chuckle at the determined air of Hannah Ann's broad back as she bent obstinately over Patricia, went off to investigate, while Patricia was being put into the warm white bed and plied with invigorating beverages.

She came back in a short time and her face was shadowed. "It's too bad," she said compassionately. "Poor Miriam will have to do without her holiday fun this year, I'm sorry to say. Dr. Griggs says its a bad sprain. She sent her love, and said not to worry about her. She'd rather have broken every bone in her body, she says, than go through with what might have happened. She's as cheerful as a cricket and vows she's going to have the time of her life in spite of it all."

Patricia sat up in bed, shaking back the

curls that hung about her eyes. "And so she is, if I have anything to do with it!" she cried ardently. All the love for her good-natured, careless Miriam welled up in a great throb of thankful tenderness. "I will see to it that she doesn't miss all the good times. Help me, Mrs. Nat and you too, Hannah Ann, to pay back a tiny, tiny bit of what I owe her. Why, she saved my life!" she cried in growing earnestness. "And here am I almost as good as new, while she's laid up for weeks and weeks. Do let me go to her and tell her how brave I think her—" And she started to push off the covers in her eagerness.

Mrs. Nat and Hannah Ann both vetoed her wish and declared she should not stir till the next morning. They would bear any messages to the heroine, as Patricia called her, but it would be just as well for both girls to settle down and try to go to sleep after all the strain and excitement they had been through.

Patricia was forced to yield, but she settled down rebelliously, declaring under

her breath against such inhuman treatment and vowing openly that she could never, never feel sleepy again. It took barely five minutes, however, in the cosy warmth of her own soft bed, with Mrs. Nat on one side of the dancing fire and Judith, who had crept silently in when Hannah Ann departed to see about Miriam's well-being, cuddled down on the other, to make Patricia realize that she was dreadfully tired. Her eyelids drooped and she nestled her head into the soft pillow, and —she was sound asleep.

The sun was shining next morning when she awakened. She gazed idly at the delicate sprays of lilacs that climbed upon her bedroom wall, remembering how in the springtime the real flowers nodded in at their counterfeits, like dainty ladies glancing and nodding at their own reflections in a mirror. Then she suddenly recalled the past night, and she sat up in bed with a start.

Her first thought was for Miriam. The clock on her dressing-table showed nearly eight and she could hear Henry shuffling

about in the dining-room below, setting the breakfast table. She knew that Miriam had been carried to the room she had been occupying—Elinor's blue and white bedroom just across the curtained space beyond her own threshold.

Hopping lightly out of bed, she hurried noiselessly into the bathroom and mounted on the towel-box to peep through the ground glass of the light-window down into Miriam's room, hoping to get some hint of her condition. She could see little through the heavy glass and as the window was set firmly in its frame, being designed only for light, she could neither peep under or over the barrier. While she peered through the wavering translucent pane, however, she caught some blur of motion in the other room. She was down in a trice and softly opening the door, she saw Miriam sitting up in bed vainly trying to shake her long dark hair into some semblance of order, while she longingly eyed the brush and comb on the nearby table.

"Oh, let me fix your hair," cried Patricia, flying to the bedside. "It's a shame to

leave you all alone struggling and toiling—" she broke off as a wave of emotion swept the words away.

Dropping on her knees by the bed, she put her arms about Miriam in one long grateful silent embrace, while her blue eyes shone warmly into Miriam's dark ones. "I can't tell you how I feel about it," she whispered, rubbing her cheek against her friend's in sudden humility before so great a debt of love, "but I'll show you, my dear. I'll show you."

Miriam was more moved by her friend's lack of words than she could have been by a profuse declaration of eternal gratitude. She knew how deep must be the feeling that deprived Patricia of words. She rubbed her cheek in response, and vainly tried to find some suitable answer for such a moment. None came and she bent her head to imprint a tender kiss of understanding love on the rosy lips which were trembling with such sweet emotion.

"Dear old Miss Pat," she murmured, fervidly.

A giggle and a splutter answered her.

She had kissed Patricia full on her pretty tipped-up nose!

There was an end of the tender scene. Patricia sprang up, bubbling with restored spirits, and Miriam was her usual careless self in a trice. After minute and searching inquiries as to the state of the painful ankle and repeated assurances that the patient was not suffering too severely to be interested in such minor matters, the two girls plunged into an excited comparison of the incidents of last night's disaster, each finding much to marvel at in the combination of happenings that had befallen them.

Hannah Ann found Patricia perched on the foot of the bed chattering away for dear life while Miriam was sitting up braiding her long locks and laughing at something her friend had just said. Hannah Ann caught only the last words, but she was not very dense when her affections were concerned.

"Indeed, you'll not step foot out of the house this morning," she said firmly, setting down the breakfast tray with a thump.

"Mrs. Spicer just phoned over to ask how you both were and I told her you were 'resting nicely, thank you,' and I mean to stick to my word. Come, make ready now, I'll be up with the toast before you know it."

Miriam suffered Patricia to tend her with a very good grace. Her ankle, though painful, was not able to quench her gay spirits, and the knowledge that she had been the chief factor in saving Patricia's life brought a glow to her cheeks and a light to her eyes.

Patricia, as she hurried off to make her own preparations. looked at her in loving admiration.

"You look positively lit up," she cried. "If you begin like this it won't be much of a job to keep you happy. I've vowed to cheer you up, if it cost my whole existence, but it looks as though I'll get off mighty easily."

Hannah Ann, returning with the toast, gave one of her enigmatical snorts. "New brooms sweep clean," she said with a nod that seemed sympathetic. "Jest you wait

till it's an old story. Stayin' in bed and bein' uncomfortable while other folks is flyin' about jollifying ain't apt to be appetizin' when it's kep' up too long."

Patricia flung a loving look at the imprisoned Miriam.

"Never mind this croaking old raven," she said with a pat on Hannah Ann's shoulder that robbed her words of their sting. "I'm going to see that you have a splendidly good time, Miriam Halden, every day that you're shut up in this blessed house. Watch me and see if I don't."

CHAPTER IX

MR. LONG'S OFFER

"WHAT in the world did he want to see you alone for?" asked Patricia.

A cosy corner had been arranged in the south room for Miriam's couch and the doctor himself had carried her carefully downstairs after lunch and deposited her on the comfortable little bed which Hannah Ann and Patricia had arranged for her. A big screen which could shut her off from the rest of the room at her pleasure was at the side of her transplanted dressing-table, and a pretty pink-and-gold invalid's tray which had served Mrs. Kendall in the past for her dainty breakfasts stood against the wall by the easy chair where Miss Pat had been lounging and reading to Miriam when Mr. Long's most unexpected call interrupted them.

Judith and the boys had done the duty

of the family at church and were now off on a round of those Christmas calls which they had all planned so merrily. Hannah Ann and Henry were enjoying an afternoon's vacation and the girls were alone in the house.

Patricia had just returned from showing Mr. Long out, and her eyes danced mischievously as she put the question, adding teasingly, "You're getting terribly youngladyish, Miriam, to have venerable gentlemen like Mr. Long paying such attentions to you."

Miriam giggled and then sniffed scornfully. "Much he cares about me," she returned with lively emphasis. "Miss Pat, that man never fooled me one instant. I knew he was after something. What do you think he had the face to ask me to do?"

She paused for the answer, which was swiftly given, and then she went on indignantly: "He wanted me to try to persuade you to *sell him* the Patrick Hennery. He says he's sure we must be tired of bothering with chickens and now that I'm going to be

laid up, you really oughtn't to tax yourself with them any longer."

Patricia was certainly surprised, but after the shocks she had sustained so recently, Mr. Long's offer did not astonish her half so much as it might have done earlier. She was quite as much impressed by the fact that he thought the Patrick Hennery worthy of purchase as by his promptness in making the offer.

"We-ell," she said slowly. "I don't see why you're so upset about it. I'd like well enough to get rid of those old chickens if I could. But we've undertaken the contract for the winter, and I suppose we're bound to abide by it. I wouldn't want to back out before our time was up. You know how I feel about it and about my music—as though I couldn't succeed with the one when the time comes, if I didn't stick to the other till the bitter end." And she sighed a little, taking up the book as though the subject were closed.

"See here, Miss Pat," said Miriam soberly. "You've been fooling me. I didn't know you were so sick of the business.

I'll not stop you if you want to sell out. Let me write to Elinor and tell her how it is——"

"Indeed I won't," flared Patricia, horrified at the mere thought. "I started out to prove that I could stick to something to the finish and I'm bound to do it. The Hennery isn't so bad as lots of things might be, particularly when the trusty Henry is able to do the lion's share of the care-taking," and she rippled merrily. "But do tell me what Mr. Long said. Why didn't he ask me, too?"

Miriam made a contemptuous face. "Thought you might need a lot of craft and finesse, it seems," she said. "He tried to get me to put it to you gently—out of consideration for the shock we'd both undergone and all that. I tell you, Miss Pat, he's planning to be chicken-king in this district and he's not neglecting even the tiniest competitor. He's bought out all the little farms in this part of the county, Hiram Todd told me, and he's going to establish a monopoly."

Patricia showed her dimples. "Well,

he's welcome, as far as I'm personally concerned," she said easily, turning to the page she had laid aside. "I wish him success with all my heart, and if he still hankers after the Patrick Hennery when the time comes that we can conscientiously part with it, and you are willing, I'll let him reign undisturbed."

As she found the paragraph and began her reading again, Miriam kept her eyes fixed on her with an absent and intent expression and seemed to be weighing something in her mind, but she said nothing more about Mr. Long and his proposition.

Judith came in as twilight was beginning to fall and Patricia had just laid aside the book. She pounced down upon the two girls sitting in the after-glow, and she burst out in quite an unusual flutter:

"Oh, Miss Pat and Miriam!" she cried, "I've such splendid news! Last night after you were asleep I sat down and wrote a regular story about the air-hole and being rescued and all, and this afternoon when we were at Grims' Ruth told Mr. Grim about

it, and he's going to print it in the paper tomorrow, just like I wrote it!"

Patricia sat up very straight and Miriam gasped. "Do you mean to say that you put in our names and all?" they cried in one breath.

"You surely didn't let Mr. Grim have it yet," said Patricia eagerly. "You mustn't give it to him till you've altered it, Judy dear. We couldn't possibly have ourselves blazoned out in print in a romantic, silly story——"

It was Judith's turn to show spirit. "I think you ought to be glad to have nice things written about you," she said loftily. "It'll be a lot better than any old reporter would make up about it. Besides," she added nervously, "Mr. Grim was going right over to the Hilltown office and he took it with him, so it's too late to fuss over it now."

Patricia surveyed her small sister narrowly. "Do you mean to tell me, Judith Kendall, that you took that story over to Grims' on Sunday, of all days, to get it put in the paper tomorrow?" she asked severely.

"I knew you were perfectly daffy over story-writing, but I didn't dream you'd go quite so far as that. I'm certainly disappointed in you. Go call up the *Telegraph* office and ask them to hold it back. I'll see Mr. Grim about it myself if you don't," she added as Judith did not move.

Judith still hesitated. "But, Miss Pat," she quavered. "He—he s-sat down to the telephone first and read the story off to them so as to have it go in. He said it would be too late if he waited till he got over there. You can't take it out if it's already in, can you?"

Patricia and Miriam looked at each other in a pucker of uncertainty. Then Miriam laughed and said with her usual careless good humor, "Oh, let the thing go. It can't hurt us, even if it does make us feel like several different kinds of geese. It'll get Judy in no end of hot water if we make a row."

Judith looked beseechingly at Patricia, who still wavered. "Please, Miss Pat," she begged, "I'd be awfully ashamed if you stopped it. I ordered fifty cents'

worth of the papers to be sent to Elinor, and I know Bruce would tease me to death if he heard about it."

Patricia gave in. "All right," she said rather grudgingly. "Only, for mercy's sake, don't tell anyone else what nonsense you've been up to. I don't want to be made any more of a laughing stock than can be helped."

Judith, very much subdued by the unexpected reception of her great news, promised readily enough. "Mr. Grim and Ruth will speak about it, I'm afraid," she said soberly with a gleam of hope beneath her staid words. "You mustn't blame me if a few do hear about it, Miss Pat. Lots of people read the *Telegraph*, you know."

Nothing more was said about the matter, although there was an electrical sort of undercurrent in Judith's calm manner which kept the subject uppermost in the minds of the two older girls. Ruth Grim and some others came in for a short time in the evening, but nothing was said about Judith's contribution to local literature.

There was a great deal of eager planning

for the week which was to follow the quiet Sunday and both Miriam and Patricia were made happy by the practical sympathy of their associates in the club's proposed festivities. Almost every one of the friends who had slipped away from their own holiday making had some plan for lightening the time of Miriam's imprisonment. Ruth Grim asked to bring some of the children from the Chautauqua Christmas tree party to show Miriam how well they did their little wand drill. Marian Johnstone offered to have two of the principal features of Tuesday's musicale come over in the afternoon and go over their parts in the Greycroft music room, within sound of Miriam's corner and within sight of her couch if she desired it. Mrs. Nat, who had been having a whispered consultation apart in the library with Hannah Ann, capped the climax by announcing that the old-fashioned supper which she had planned to give at the Social House was postponed from Monday evening at the club, to Friday evening, otherwise recognized as the night after New Year's, in the south room at Greycroft.

"Miriam needn't think she is going to escape me," she chuckled, waving off the thanks which Patricia tried to pour upon her. "I'm so dead set on her wearing that posy dress that I fished out from our garret for her that I'll wait another month if she's not able to have us cavorting about her cot by that time."

Miriam vowed that she was already feeling better from the mere mention of it, and the visitors rose to go, well pleased with the enthusiastic reception of their thoughtfulness.

Patricia could not resist a word in Mrs. Spicer's ear as she was on the threshold.

"Don't tell a soul," she cautioned, "but if you see a flowery piece in the paper tomorrow you'll know that Judy's broken into print once again. She wrote it and disposed of it before we knew about it, or it never would have been printed, I can tell you."

Mrs. Nat chuckled and shook her head. "That girl's not hiding her light under a bushel," she commented. "Mama will be tickled to death, no matter how sloppy it is.

I'll tell her and Nathaniel, of course, but I won't let on to another soul who wrote it."

The evening was a short one, for the boys were out and Judith went early to bed, while Patricia, tired with the experiences and excitements of the last twenty-four hours, allowed Hannah Ann to pull the screen about Miriam's couch and pack her sleepy self off to the lilac bedroom as soon as the dishes were done and Hannah Ann free to take charge of Miriam.

The memory of Judith's startling piece of news remained with her even in sleep and she dreamed of enormous placards printed in huge red headlines with a full account of her own sensations as she first sighted the treacherous air-hole, and other equally alarming revelations of her moment of fright.

It was with a feeling of relief that she woke to find Judith perched on the foot of her bed waving the freshly printed sheet before her drowsy eyes.

"See," cried Judith in true artistic self-absorption. "Here it is! Right on the

front page. Oh, Miss Pat, do look at it! There's a picture of you and Miriam, too. They got them from the photograph at the Social House tournament. And, oh, they've put it in just exactly as I wrote it. How *lovely* of Mr. Grim to put the headlines in that fat black print!"

Patricia, seizing the paper, saw the glaring top lines:

BEAUTY IN DEADLY PERIL !
LOVELY HEROINE RESCUES MOST
POPULAR MEMBER OF TENNIS CLUB.

She ran her eye down the lines describing in somewhat the same florid style the accident and rescue, and she turned her reproachful gaze on Judith, who was watching her with a most self-satisfied expression.

"Do you mean to say you wrote that stuff?" she demanded. "I wouldn't have thought it of you, Judy Kendall. It's regular rot. Sounds like those horrid scare heads of trashy city papers."

Judith nodded complacently. "Doesn't it, though?" she agreed. "I was afraid I couldn't make it sound that way, but it

does. You have to write differently for a paper, you know."

Patricia gave a helpless little laugh. "You're positively hopeless when it comes to ink-pots," she said, beginning to scramble out of bed. "Take that stuff down to Miriam, but don't let Tom or Ted see it. I want to have my breakfast in peace, at least."

Judith lingered for a moment. "Danny Sneath's been waiting for you for ever so long," she announced indifferently. "He says he's got to see you 'most important.' Hannah Ann's locked him up in the wood-shed till you come down."

CHAPTER X

BROTHER AND SISTER

"WHAT in the world can Danny Sneath want at this time of day?" wondered Patricia, as she scrambled through her dressing and hurried downstairs, flinging a cloak about her as she went.

Danny was, as Judith had said, actually locked up in the woodshed and his mild, serious face showed placidly through the wooden lattice. He looked like some gentle domestic animal mistakenly put into the cage intended for a wild and savage beast.

Patricia could not help laughing as she turned the key which Judith had delivered to her. "I hope you aren't going to bite, Danny," she said gayly. "I'm almost afraid to let you out. Why didn't you come into the kitchen to wait?"

Danny showed a new sled on a rope fastened to his wrist. "Jus' got her," he

announced proudly. "Can't take chances on some kid swipin' her while I'm not lookin'."

Patricia was much amused at his precautions, but insisted that he so far abandon his fears as to come into the warmth of the sewing room while he told his errand. Danny complied reluctantly, refusing, however, to remove the rope from his red, scrawny wrist, and remaining close to the crack of the door to peep out repeatedly at his treasure.

"Now, Danny, what is it?" asked Patricia kindly. "Hannah Ann told me that Henry gave you back your old clothes yesterday, so I know it's not that you've come for."

She was hoping that he might be going to offer some apology for his invasion of the carnival, but it was evident that such an idea never entered his mind. He dived into his pocket and fished out from among a number of bits of string, old nails, lumps of rosin and other desirable articles, a little gold pin, which Patricia recognized with a start.

"This here's yours, ain't it?" he asked, holding it out to her. "I picked her up in that rusty-shelter place, after you'd left."

Patricia was fairly overwhelmed by surprise and delight. "Oh, Danny, how sweet of you to bring it to me!" she cried, grateful and triumphant at once. "It's a dear little keepsake from Holland, and I'll love it more than ever now. I'm *so* glad you didn't send it to me, for I couldn't have thanked you half so well then," and she flung an impetuous arm about the swelling Danny and gave him an ardent hug. "You've really started to be a good boy already, haven't you?"

He nodded complacently. "Sure," he replied, yielding to the softer influences for a moment. Then his face lighted with its impish gleam and he added, "I wasn't goin' to trust Henry with it yesterday. He may be all right, but coons is coons, I say, and I don't trust 'em with my bacon," and he winked in a way that made Patricia want to shake him.

She released him quickly, and pinning the brooch in her blouse front, said briskly,

"Run along now, Danny. I'll have something for you to do for me later on, but I have to trot off to breakfast now. Come at nine o'clock and——"

She felt very sagacious to cover her intention of rewarding him for his honesty under this pretense of service to herself.

He shook his head with a thin assumption of regret. "Can't get around again this mornin', " he said, wagging his head and strutting a little. "I got an engagement with Natty Spicer. I only come over 'cause Marty made me. Gee, isn't she the dandy?" he grinned, peering out at his sled.

Patricia's shocked look caught him back to his errand before she had a chance to speak and he swiftly evaded her reproof. "Oh, Marty's a grand nurse," he explained, "and she wants to know if you'll let her come over and sit with that Miriam girl when you've a mind to be out or anything. She's a good one, Marty is," he added convincingly.

Patricia was touched with this further sign of grace and she accepted eagerly,

thinking that she might thus be able to work some additional reform in the family of Sneath without posing too openly as their guardian angel.

"Of course, I'll be glad to have her come," she said cordially. "I don't suppose she has much time now, though. Clara must need lots of care."

Danny shook off the implication lightly. "Oh, Mom's takin' care of her," he explained. "Marty ain't workin' much. She'll be over after a bit," and with a nod, he wriggled swiftly out of the door, and with a twist and twirl of his wrist he sent the sled spinning down the drive, riding it easily and proudly as any old Roman in his war chariot of polished brass.

Patricia looked after him with a glow in her heart. "He's really beginning to like to be good," she thought, exulting in memory of her own hopeful words. "There is a good side to him, after all, and it hasn't taken very long to find it, either."

Hannah Ann met her as she went in and there was a cloud on her brow. "Those Sneaths are getting too thick under foot for

the health of our belongings," she said glumly. "If you'll let me know when you're expectin' the next visit, I'll lock up the spoons."

Patricia was too happy in her success to be discouraged. She patted Hannah Ann's arm and said gayly, "You know you don't mean a word of that gruffy-wuffy grumbling. You're just as tender-hearted as anyone. I haven't forgotten Saturday night yet," she ended softly.

Hannah Ann was only slightly mollified. "Those Sneaths are some different from what you're used to," she returned darkly. "Take my word and don't let 'em from under your eye a single minute. Here's a note that Mrs. Spicer left for you. She was here before you were up and she saw Miss Miriam. Land to gracious, what a fly-away—" She shook her head as Patricia, after a hasty glance at the sheet of note-paper, flew off to the south room, calling out to Miriam in tones of disappointment as she went.

"Mrs. Nat's gone away!" she cried, fluttering into the screened enclosure. "Mr.

Spicer had to go to Washington on business and he's taken them both with him. Did she tell you when she was coming back? And what did she say about the old-fashioned party? Oh, I forgot to ask how you were this morning. So many things are happening all at once that I've lost my head, I guess."

Miriam was sitting in her usual position, but her eyes were brighter and her color better than on the previous day. A folded newspaper may have been responsible for the twinkle in her eyes and she motioned to it as she replied that she was all right, but that she hadn't time to waste on such trifles, since Mrs. Nat had almost knocked the breath out of her by telling her that Mr. Spicer was going down to Washington with Hiram Todd to confer with some eminent authorities in regard to some geological work there.

"Think of our Hiram Todd being asked—*asked,* mind you—to confer with Washington sages," she said. "That's partly your doings, Miss Pat. If you hadn't been nice to him at that dreadful Donation night

he'd never have come out of his shell. It's a pity that Judy didn't think of that added laurel in your crown. She's hardly left anything to the imagination in this lurid composition, has she?"

Patricia shook her head almost savagely at the offending sheet. "It's perfectly amazing how she could make up such dime-novel stuff," she answered contemptuously. "It isn't a bit like her own nice little stories, and the worst of it is that she's actually proud of it. I suppose we'll be the laughing-stock of the whole country after this. But let's forget that horrid newspaper while we can. The boys will rub it in hard enough, I'm sure. I've something else to tell you that's a lot better than Judy's stuff."

Miriam listened to her account of the return of the pin, and her enthusiasm was almost as great as Patricia's over this unexpected sign of grace in the boy who was the by-word of the countryside. She was of one mind with her friend as to the desirability of taking Marty into their scheme of regeneration as soon as possible.

"It's a pity Mrs. Nat doesn't know how mistaken she was in Danny," she said regretfully. "She and Hiram would open their eyes if they knew what we do, wouldn't they, Miss Pat?"

Patricia nodded eagerly. "But don't let on to them for the world," she urged. "We're to write to her at the hotel there and let her know how you get on. We won't say a word, though, so that when she comes back we can give her the shock of her life."

This delightful hope added zest to the whole day and gave them fortitude to endure the teasing which Tom and Ted both indulged in most unmercifully, and braced their spirits against Judith's airs of undisguised satisfaction in the notoriety which her effusion had thrust upon them.

It was a cloudy, lowering day and Miriam felt the depression of the weather keenly, and had it not been for the interest in their secret project, Patricia felt that the time would have been hard to fill, even though Ruth, true to her promise, brought a band of giggling, restless little girls to go through the wand drill which they were to

give later in the afternoon at the Christmas tree party at the Social House.

Marty, in spite of her brother's assurances that she would speedily make her appearance, did not materialize until nearly four o'clock, when both girls had given her up for the day and were proportionately glad to see her.

She was a thin, elfish creature, with a shock of dark, unkempt hair which had at some remote period been bobbed in the popular fashion, but which now clustered in distressed peaks and points about her sallow neck. Her dark eyes were unnaturally large and bright, and the expression of careless amusement which lurked in them made a strong contrast to her pinched and neglected aspect. Her clothes were of the shabbiest and were frankly inherited from both her older sister and her tall, stout mother, but she had scrubbed and polished the visible portions of her anatomy till face and hands shone with cleanliness.

She evidently expected to be left in charge of the invalid, but she cheerfully accepted Patricia's presence and prepared to enjoy

herself as much as possible under the existing circumstances.

"You girls got it all fixed up fine, ain't you?" she said, surveying the green festoons, the red-ribboned wreaths and the holly-trimmed pictures and shelves. "I tell you, you beat us. We ain't even a tree this year. Clara, she mostly does that. Mom ain't one for fussin' much."

The picture of the easy-going sloven whose chief activity seemed to lie in the direction of gossip and gadding, rose before Patricia and she felt a qualm of pity for the girl.

"It's almost our tea-time, Marty," she said rising. "I'm sure you like some of Hannah Ann's good cakes. You can take care of Miss Miriam while I see about the tray."

Marty eyed her with sparkling eyes. "Sure, I'll see to her," she responded cheerfully. "But say, ain't your hired girl the limit! Makes you wait on yourself, does she? I thought grand folks like you never done a stitch for themselves—jus' sat and ordered folks about like sin."

Miriam's ripple was too much for Patricia and she fled. Marty was clever enough to see that something was amiss, but she did not mean that the poor child should realize that it was because of her presence in the drawing-room that Patricia hesitated to call upon her for the usual service.

The tray was waiting in its usual place on the side table in the pantry, and Patricia noticed with a gurgle of amusement that the china was of the plainest and only plated silver ware was in evidence. Hannah Ann was not visible either in kitchen or pantry, but the tea, drawn to a nicety, and some cakes and crackers stood waiting.

Patricia appropriated these and hastily substituting some pretty china and dainty silver for the plainer articles, she made her way back to the south room.

Marty did not offer to stir, but sat drooping comfortably on her chair while Patricia moved the muffin-stand and arranged the tray, but when the tea was poured she rose with alacrity and handed Miriam's plate and cup with all the good-will in the world.

"Say, that's mostly water, ain't it?" she

asked after sipping her own well-sugared cup. "Guess you're like Clara. She ain't allowed to have too much, you know, now that she's down with typhoid, but she's that crazy after it that she'll get holt of the teapot and she'll hide it under the bed till Mom ain't lookin'. Then she'll suck it dry and get me to fill her up from the kittle onct or twict into the bargain. Say, she's the kid for tea, all right. She can drink anything, no matter how it's watered."

Patricia tried to pass over this unflattering comment on the tea allowed them by Hannah Ann's strict sense of duty, but her guest was not to be diverted from her topic. "You ought to see how funny she looks with that old teapot up to her face, swillin' away through the spout," she confided, and was going on with more intimate revelations of their domestic amusements when she caught the expression of Patricia's perturbed face. She was keen enough to see that she was not making a good impression by her lively speeches and she dropped back into her quieter manner, giving her whole attention to the cakes and candies

which Miriam had added to the refreshments.

As she was picking up the crumbs that had fallen on her lap and eating them carefully, her eye fell on the clock in the corner. She gave an exclamation of surprise and rose, handing her emptied cup and plate to Patricia.

"I'm goin' now," she said with a cheerful nod. "Doctor's comin' about this time, and Mom ain't likely to be home. He said he'd quit if there wasn't someone about to take the pills and things, so I'll mosey along. Last time, cat got everything he left, and, Gee, he was hot over it!"

She made her good-byes very creditably, and with a promise to come again on the following morning she sped away in the twilight, leaving some confusion of mind behind her.

Patricia looked at Miriam and Miriam stared at Patricia, each hesitating to put her thoughts in words. At last Miriam broke out with a bubble of laughter, holding out a hand to her chum.

"We're both pretty well stumped, aren't

we, partner?" she confessed. "Danny seemed a hard enough nut to crack, but this girl's twice as much of a poser."

Patricia was already recovering her buoyancy. "Marty isn't exactly what you might call a hopeful case," she admitted, slipping down on the rug beside Miriam's couch. "But we can't expect too much. Danny is going to be such a comfort to us that we can afford to waste some efforts on his sister."

"She'll hate to learn to sew, as you suggested," mused Miriam, gazing into the dancing hearth-fire. "She's clever enough to pretend to like anything if she hopes to get something out of it for herself, but I don't trust her. She's too easy-going to want to be pulled out of the rut. Now, Danny——"

Patricia interrupted her with a contented little murmur. "Oh, Danny is going to be the best thing we ever did!" she cried ardently. "I can see how we're going to crow over Ted and Hiram and dear Mrs. Nat, too. He'll be worth all the trouble we can take on the whole bunch of Sneaths!"

CHAPTER XI

PATRICIA REMAINS FIRM

THE next few days were passed in as happy a fashion as could be desired under the circumstances. Miriam made a most exemplary invalid and Patricia kept her vow so well in mind that there were no dull moments in the cosy corner at Greycroft save those of Miriam's own choosing when she was either wrestling with the pain or resting after it had subsided.

Everybody helped to make the holiday a real season of joy and good-will and the south room was the scene of much impromptu entertainment. The festivities at the club were repeated so far as possible before Miriam's fireside and Patricia insisted upon renouncing almost every engagement which would keep her long from her friend. Ted and Tom did their utmost to bring diverting accounts of their strenuous out-of-door sports to the patient, while

Judith read interminably when the others were absent, patiently subduing her own desire for another sort of literature out of respect to Miriam's rather frivolous taste.

Danny Sneath had proved a perfect treasure-grove of amusement, but they saw less and less of him as his popularity with the new owner of Red Top grew rapidly, much to the disgust of the two girls, who begrudged their protégé to the acquisitive Mr. Long. Marty had not changed much since her first call. She came regularly and accepted the tasks assigned to her with the same cheerful indifference she had evinced at the beginning, but her manner had not improved and she made her comments with the freedom that so shocked Patricia at their first encounter. Hannah Ann, it is true, had begun to relax in her favor while she still stood out against Danny's few attempts to conciliate her, but she was only one against a united five, since Judith had become a warm advocate of the more attractive scalawag, and Ted found Marty's easy-going familiarity quite unbearable to

his manly dignity on the two occasions when he had encountered her at Greycroft.

Taking it altogether, Patricia had never enjoyed a holiday season so keenly as she did the present one, and, so far from finding that her devotion to Miriam was a bar to merry-making, discovered a hundred added pleasures in serving the friend who had saved her life.

"I'm having the time of my life right here at home," she said, laughing down into Miriam's earnest face. "I really haven't missed a thing yet, and I'm not going back on my vow for all the shindigs in the world. Oh, it's all very well to make eyes at me, Miss, but you can't make me back down now. I've stayed away from the musicale and the masquerade, and the New Year's reception at Social House, but haven't we had just as much fun as we possibly could have anywhere right here in this adorable old room?"

Miriam could not deny the charge and so she did not answer at all, and Patricia went on gayly: "The musicianers brought their music, and the masqueraders brought

themselves, and the reception walked over bodily, so where's the difference whether we had the fun here or somewhere else? You know, Miriam Halden," she said with another note in her vibrant tones, "that I simply couldn't have half the fun, when I'd be thinking about you off here by yourself. You see that it's pure selfishness in me and you may as well give up. I'm not going to Ruth's party nor to the dancing party at Hilltown with the boys, and that's an end of it once and for all."

Miriam began to open her lips when Judith came in with some letters in her hand. She was looking very much elated, but neither of them noticed it as they seized upon the envelopes she held out to them.

"Mine's from Mrs. Nat," said Patricia joyfully. "I wonder when she's ever coming home."

"Not too soon, I hope," laughed Miriam, tearing the corner of a bulky envelope. "We want to get hold of something to prove to her and Hiram that Danny is really a made-over. Oh, Miss Pat, mother wants me to meet them in New Orleans the

last of January! They're going to leave California next week, and spend a month or two there and in Florida on the way home."

Patricia dropped her own letter to listen, while Judith stood wagging her head and smiling mysteriously to herself, apparently too absorbed in her own happy thoughts to notice the others.

"I told you that you should have told her about your accident. Of course, you might go down a little later," she said soberly. Dr. Griggs says you'll be as good as new in six weeks or maybe sooner."

"But six weeks is the middle of February! And they want me there for Margot Le Fran's coming-out party! It's going to be perfectly gorgeous and there'll be hosts of fun afterward, and I do so love New Orleans!"

Patricia listened with a troubled heart. All the pleasant times they had been having and were looking forward to with such eagerness seemed to fade and shrivel in the glare of such magnificence as was to attend Margot Le Fran's début into social

life. She felt sudden contrition that she should have been the cause of Miriam missing such stately revels. Mrs. Nat's letter dropped unheeded to the floor.

"Perhaps you might be ready sooner than we think," she said slowly. "There are all sorts of helps that we might try. I wonder if massaging or anything like that would do? We'll ask Dr. Griggs at once. Judy, see if you can get him on the phone, will you?"

Judith drew a long breath. "I'll go at once, Miss Pat," she said in subdued excitement; "but mayn't I tell you something first? I've been waiting ever so long."

Patricia turned carelessly, expecting some of Judith's sensational trifles. "Fire away, Judy," she said with good-natured restraint. "What is your mighty news?"

Judith looked hurt. "You oughtn't to make fun of me," she replied. "It's really something very exciting. Elinor told me in her letter," and she displayed a familiar style of gray envelope. "She says it's a secret, but I think you ought to know, so that you can be ready."

"Well, for mercy's sake, what is it?" cried Patricia, unable to wait the end. "Do get to it, Ju, if you want us to keep our reason."

"You haven't waited half so long as I did to tell you," Judith reminded her. "But I'll tell you if you'll both cross your breasts not to tell."

They promised eagerly, all their interest centered momentarily on Judith's revelation.

"Well, then," said that young lady slowly, enjoying herself immensely in her triumphant moment, "Madame Milano is in America and is coming out to Greycroft in a couple of weeks to hear you sing, Miss Pat."

Patricia was too dazed to reply. The news that the prima donna who had condescended to test her voice at Leeuwarden was actually within reach and might appear in a brief fortnight carried her so completely off her feet that she forgot Miriam and her problems, forgot Mrs. Nat's letter and everything else connected with her life of pleasure and holiday making. The music room at

Leeuwarden rose clearly before her and she saw Madame Milano in her simple white frock at the piano and heard her gay commendation on Patricia's own efforts. A great wave of emotion swept over her and instinctively she turned to her small sister as one who would understand.

"Oh, Judy darling," she began, but the happy tears choked the rest of the sentence and she could only clasp the bringer of good tidings close in a silent ecstasy of joyful wonder in the good fortune which was coming to her.

Judith was quite content with the effect she had produced, and when Patricia released her she went placidly off to do her errand, returning with the news that Dr. Griggs had left the office some time ago and would not be home till late. Her information fell on indifferent ears, however, for both girls were chattering away with all their might, regardless of the fact that the other would not listen. Mrs. Nat's forgotten letter lay under the table, while Patricia told for the third time the story of Madame Milano's gracious interest and

Miriam rattled on with plans for her reception that grew steadily more gloriously impossible with each telling.

Judith picked up the neglected sheet. "I should think you'd want the hear about Mrs. Nat, even if you are going to do wonderful things," she said rather indignantly. "Mrs. Nat and Mama Shelly are as nice as any opera singers that ever lived, even if they don't paint and powder and wear short skirts and high-heeled slippers."

The picture which Judith's words called up made both Patricia and Miriam laugh, but it also brought another picture of their good friends in their true friendly character, and Patricia reached eagerly for her letter.

"Dear Mrs. Nat, she'll be glad for me, too," she said softly, and then her face changed and a sunny smile dimpled her pink cheek. "If that isn't just like her. Listen to this," and she read aloud with infinite enjoyment the brief contents of the sheet.

Mrs. Spicer, although she did not mention any date, commended their persevering gayety and promised additional features

for the old-fashioned supper when she returned, adding the real gist of the letter in the postscript, as was often her habit. "I hear that Mr. Long is trying to buy up all the egg factories in the country. If he asks you, and E. & B. are willing, better sell the P. H. while he's anxious about it. He'll be apt to give a better price now than later. He is hoping to marry Senator Riley's girl in the spring and he wants to cut a big swath before his future daddy-in-law. Remember me to the cake merchant of whom I am hearing things also."

Miriam's face was a study in conflicting expressions as Patricia laid down the sheet and looked at her with dancing eyes, demanding gayly whether Mrs. Nat was or was not a regular wizard to be so well informed on matters at home when she was so far away.

Miriam's puzzled look vanished in one of determination. "I may as well make a clean breast of it, Miss Pat," she said, rather uneasily. "I did something you may think awfully cheeky. I wrote to Elinor last Sunday afternoon when you

were asleep in the easy chair, after Mr. Long had gone, and I told her all about his offer. I knew you didn't like the chickens and I thought you ought to give them up——"

Patricia broke in on her confession with a ringing note of purpose in her voice. "No I won't give them up till the very last moment," she cried valiantly. "I wouldn't be worthy of success in anything else if I backed out before it was absolutely necessary. Madame Milano may make me keep on waiting for a long, long time before she'll let me study, and then I'll show you all that I'm not such a namby-pamby thing as you seem to think. I'll keep on with the Patrick Hennery till I get my trunk packed for the music-factory, as Mrs. Nat would call it, and I won't add a jot to Mr. Long's glorification till I'm good and ready. Of course," she added, more quietly, "that doesn't include you, Miriam, unless you want it to. You can pull out of the firm whenever you please. I'll buy your share with my Christmas money——"

It was Miriam's turn to interrupt. "Not

much!" she declared, all her hesitation gone. "I'll remain in Miss Pat & Company, Limited, as long as it's a firm. I'm not much good just now, but I'll write mother that I can't possibly leave—unless," she added, wavering a little again, "you really do find that you're ready to study when Madame Milano comes. And then, of course, we'll have to shut up shop and turn the keys ever to the Noble Descendant."

"I wonder what she means about Danny Sneath?" said Judith, who never missed details. "Someone must be writing her about him. Don't you wish you knew who it was?"

Patricia laughed carelessly. "Some of the old ladies who were so shocked at my bringing him to the Good-will Tea perhaps," she replied lightly. "Miriam, I'm going to see that we have a very special tray this afternoon. We'll have to celebrate the good news somehow and everyone's over at Hilltown practicing for the pageant for the dance. Judy, get Hannah Ann to give us some of her bestest goodies, there's a dear."

Judith went readily. "Marty Sneath is coming up the walk," she said with a glance out of the window as she passed it. "And there's Dr. Griggs' sleigh at the gate. Do you want to invite them both?"

"Mercy, no!" cried Patricia in dismay. "I wouldn't know how to talk to Dr. Griggs at a tea-tray to save my life. Marty will stay, no doubt, so have a cup and plate for her."

CHAPTER XII

JUDITH BRINGS THE MAIL

AFTER Hannah Ann had shown the doctor out, Patricia, followed by Judith and Marty, hurried eagerly back to the south room to hear the verdict.

Miriam was sitting staring at the fire with an unusually thoughtful expression. She started and fell into her every-day self again at Patricia's question.

"Oh, yes, I'm getting along finely," she replied. "He says he's never had a patient do so well. I'm breaking the record, and he can't see that I need any rubbing or fussing over at all. He says," she raised her voice to be heard over Patricia's jubilations; "he says that I'm unnaturally healthy and abnormally happy, and the two are working together to bring me around in fine style. So you see, Miss Pat, your vow wasn't made for nothing."

Patricia opened her eyes very wide at

this, but Miriam insisted, "If you hadn't slaved yourself to death making me have a royal good time this whole week, I'd have moped and been awfully edgey, and that would have kept me back."

"Pooh, you'd have been happy anyway, with all the people chasing to make you happy," she said carelessly. "What did he say about your getting well? Does he think it will be as long as he said at first?"

Miriam shook her head with an odd mixture of pleasure and reluctance. "He says I'll be able to go south in time for Margot's party. It isn't till the last of the month, you know," she said. "I'm going to ask father to let me go down and come back the next week——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Patricia. "You'll do no such thing. If I can't run the Patrick Hennery, with two such assistants as Henry and Hannah Ann, not to mention Judy here, I'd better go out of business at once. You wouldn't be any good poking about on crutches, as you'll probably have to for ages. You'll just make up your mind to go, Miss, as soon as

you are allowed to, and you ought to thank your stars that you're fortunate enough to be so 'unnaturally healthy and abnormally happy' as to make a record for yourself."

Hannah Ann set the tea-tray down with a bump. "Seems to me," she commented casually, "that the doctor ain't bein' counted in among your blessin'. Sounds to me like you two young ladies was just naturally healin' that ankle up by your own smartness," and she marched out stiffly, though Patricia caught a twinkle in her small snapping eyes.

Marty giggled outright. "That Griggs, he's a good one, I tell you," she said, accepting the plate which Judith politely offered her. "He's done lots for us—him and Mis' Griggs. Mom says there ain't no better cook in the whole town than Mis' Griggs, and she'd rather eat her mince pies than anything the other women can make."

Judith preserved her air of pained politeness with which she heard all of Marty's comments on her superiors, but Miriam burst our laughing at the ridiculous side of the picture: Mrs. Sneath, stout and hearty,

too lazy to do more than the most necessary cooking for her half starved brood, condescending to approve of dainty, energetic Mrs. Griggs' delicious pastry. Patricia saw another side of it.

"Marty," she said, turning to her eagerly, "there's something you might do—learn to cook things nicely, so you could have good things at home. Don't you think you'd like it? I'm sure Hannah Ann will help you. She's beginning to like you pretty well."

This was a rather liberal interpretation of Hannah Ann's grudging preference for Marty in opposition to her more popular brother, but it served its purpose well. Marty brightened and sat a little more erect in her chair. It was evident that Hannah Ann was a power in her eyes.

"Why, I wouldn't mind," she replied with more interest than she had shown in the sewing lessons. "I bet she's a crackerjack on chickens, too. Mebbe she'd show me how to do 'em. If she does 'em as good as her cookies, Mom 'ud be tickled to death to let me cook 'em."

"But you'd learn how to do plain things first," said Patricia, smiling at what she considered a flight of ambitious imagination. "She would show you how to do the sort of things you have every day."

Here Hannah Ann herself appeared, ushering in Mr. Long, and the conversation came to an abrupt end. Marty followed Hannah Ann out into the back precincts and Judith slipped quietly away to her own room, while the two girls welcomed their guest with a little flutter of uncertainty. They had not seen him since Miriam's note had made Patricia's decision final, and Miriam, who had mistrusted him from the first, rather expected a coolness in his manner, or perhaps another and more insistent renewal of his offer for the Patrick Hennery.

Nothing of the sort was in Mr. Long's mind, however, and he chatted agreeably as he sipped the weak tea which Patricia blushingly served him, and protested that both it and the cakes were exactly to his taste.

He had just come, he said, from the prac-

tice in the Hilltown hall, and he was quite enthusiastic in his criticisms on the progress of the performers, declaring that they had improved so greatly under the professional dancer which he had insisted on bringing from town to instruct them, that the affair promised to equal any of the kind he had seen.

Patricia listened to his description of the various dances and drills with a keen interest, but she was firm in her determination to adhere to her vow, and all of Miriam's persuasions and Mr. Long's urging could not shake her.

"I know it's going to be wonderful," she said reluctantly, "and I'll probably never have such a chance to be in such a splendid pageant again, but I've made up my mind not to leave Greycroft or Miriam for so long a time, until she is really much better or something else happens."

Miriam understood, but Mr. Long was perplexed by what seemed an overdone sense of gratitude towards the preserver of her life. He did not press her further, however, and the matter dropped, to Pa-

tricia's relief, and a more congenial topic took its place.

"That Danny of yours seems to be the real stuff, after all," he said as he rose to take his leave. "I've tried him out on almost every job of his size on the place and there isn't a cleverer or quicker hand in all Red Top. The men aren't very keen on him, but I expected them to be a bit jealous of the youngster. 'Give a dog a bad name,' you know. He's as sharp as a steel trap and about as reliable. I'm obliged to you for bringing him to the tea party, Miss Patricia. I think he's found his place at last. Chickens seem to be his *metier*."

Patricia beamed and expressed the delight she felt, but Miriam remained mute until the door had closed on their agreeable guest.

"'*Metier*'!" she sniffed. "Why doesn't he use English. I don't believe he knows what it means, anyway. I suppose he'd excuse himself by saying that his ancestors were in the household of William the Conqueror and he hadn't lost the habit of using their tongue."

Patricia rippled at her warmth. "You're

jealous—just plain jealous," she teased. "You think Mr. Long's going to take all the credit for making Danny over, and you don't like it at all."

Miriam began an indignant denial when Hannah Ann appeared again, this time from the kitchen, bringing another caller, whose presence did not seem to inspire her with much satisfaction.

"Here's your precious Danny," she said shortly, pushing him into the room as though he had been a parcel of goods. "I ain't time to make any more tea, either."

Danny was entirely composed. He smiled at Hannah Ann's disappearing back and then strolled across to make his formal bow, a performance he had much enjoyment in performing on every possible occasion.

Mr. Long's words had prepared a warm reception for him from Patricia in spite of Miriam's passing cloud, and she welcomed him with unusual cordiality.

"I hear you're doing so nicely at Red Top," she said, heaping his plate with goodies. "It must be splendid for you to

be able to help at home, now that you're earning——"

Danny interrupted her swiftly. "I ain't bringin' in any *money*," he declared with innocent surprise at her mistake. "Why, don't you know I'm just learnin' the business? Old Long, he says I'm catchin' on fine, and maybe he'll take me on reg'lar after a bit."

Patricia and Miriam telegraphed their opinion of such meanness on the part of a grown-up man to a small struggling sinner, but they resolutely and wisely kept their feelings to themselves.

Danny was always pleased to talk, and he chatted on unconscious of the undercurrent of indignation in the girls' minds. "I tell you," he said, slowly consuming an almond cake, "I've had a dandy time over at the farm. Old Long's off most of the time now and I get lots of sleddin' and skatin'. That there pond's slick since the last freeze. Ain't no air-holes in it, neither. Guess there wouldn't be any pieces in the paper about me if I'd fell in," he grinned broadly at this pleasantry, not appearing to

notice that Patricia's expression had again changed.

"Why, Danny Sneath, you're cheating if you go off while Mr. Long's away," she said in a shocked tone. "He thinks you're reliable and trustworthy, and all the while you're tricking him behind his back."

Danny sat up with wide eyes. "Trickin' nothin', " he said with a swift assumption of indignation. "I ain't takin' *his* time. I only go sleddin' when the work's done and it's my hours off. I guess I ain't any sneak neither." And he fairly bristled at the accusation.

Patricia was quick to repent. "Oh, don't feel hurt, Danny," she said, giving him another cake. "I didn't understand. I'm glad you feel that way about it and I can't tell you how splendid we think it is that you are doing so well. It pays to be good, doesn't it, Danny-boy?"

He nodded, though his eyes rested with more interest on the still generous plates of dainties on the table. "I s'pose it does," he said with slow, pathetic shakes of his head; "but it's fierce that a fellow has to

see his fam'bly on half rations while he's stuffin' and gorgin' hisself at Red Top and other places."

Miriam was eager to atone for her moment of coolness. "Should you like to take some good things home with you tonight?" she asked, with her face brightening as she rapidly glanced at the resources of the table and tray.

Danny's mental pain was alleviated at once. "You bet I would," he drawled gratefully. "You'll see if they don't have a good time at home tonight. Why, the kids can have a reg'lar party, just like that one Miss Pat here took me to. Gee, they'll like those buns, you bet!"

The picture of such scant merry-making moved Miriam greatly. "Here is something more for them," she said, holding out the be-ribboned box of choice candy which had come in the last mail for her from town. "I wish it were ten pounds instead of only two."

Danny accepted the offerings with grave appreciation, stowing them under his coat out of sight as best he could. Then he

made his farewell bow and vanished quickly, before Judith returned for her book.

Patricia and Miriam were so full of their exultation over Danny's complete reform that they scarcely heard her when she came in and sat quietly down by the hearth.

"To think that it's only a week and a day since you took him to the tea," said Miriam wonderingly. "It's absolutely miraculous how much he has changed since then."

"What I like best about him, is his feeling sorry that the rest haven't such good things as he gets at Red Top," said Patricia, smiling happily into the fire. "That shows, more than anything else, how really kind hearted he is. Marty would never see that side of it. She laughs over everything."

Miriam shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "I'm tired of Marty," she confessed. "She's like rubber—no impression can be made on her. Danny is worth ten of her. We'll make Mrs. Nat open her eyes when we tell her what Mr. Long said. Isn't it fine we've really something to tell her now."

Patricia nodded but still mused. "I

wish—," she began, and then hesitated. "I'm going to have something more to Danny's credit," she went on briskly. "I'm going to give him half of my Christmas money to take home to them, as a reward for his good record at Red Top. I hope he hasn't gone yet." And she sprang up and hurried out after the vanished Danny.

She came back in a moment with disappointment written on her face. "He went right home," she said regretfully. "Marty waited for him and they went out together."

Judith spoke eagerly. "Let me take it to him," she said rising. "I'd love to run down there in the sunset and it won't take me a moment. Put it in an envelope and I'll give it to him. I have some, too, if you don't mind. Mr. Grim gave me five dollars for that piece about the accident and I'd like to give some of that."

Patricia was too intent to be much surprised. "Well, get your things on," she agreed, "and I'll have it ready for you. Miriam wants to send some, too. I do hope you'll catch him."

Judith was ready before they had the enclosure sealed, and Patricia handed it to her with many precautions as to secrecy. "I wouldn't have the boys know what we're doing for anything," she said, as Judith sped away and she returned to the cosy corner. "They don't like Danny much even yet."

"Boys are such opinionated things," commented Miriam, settling comfortably into her cushions. "They think no one knows anything so well as they do."

Patricia, knowing how fond Miriam was of being served by those same opinionated beings, laughed lightly. "We'll miss them when they go, though," she said. "I'm sorry they are leaving so soon. I tried to persuade Ted to wait over for the pageant and the supper, but he won't break their engagement with Fred Walton. He says he promised him last fall and he isn't going to break his word for all the parties in the world."

A light step sounded on the portico and Judith burst in, glowing and triumphant. "He was right on the corner by the store

and I didn't have to go down to the house," she said, flinging off her wraps. "I gave it to him just as you said, Miss Pat, and he promised not to tell any one about it."

The sound of sleigh-bells in the drive cut further comments. "The boys are early," said Patricia. "We'll have to talk it over later. The only thing I'm looking forward to now is Mrs. Nat's coming home. Oh, won't she be surprised!"

CHAPTER XIII

ELINOR ARRIVES

"ISN'T it perfectly jolly that Elinor is coming for the Old-Fashioned Supper?" said Miriam. "We saw so little of her when she was here at Christmas that we'll have a regular jubilation of it this time."

"She says she'll have to make some more studies for that window," said Patricia, looking again at the letter which lay before her on the breakfast tray. "Those drawings she made of Judith weren't thin and haggard enough to please Mrs. Galway. She wants us to look up someone who'll fit the part."

"Marty Sneath is pretty thin," ventured Judith in a rather subdued tone. She had been so proud of being selected for the model for Elinor's first commission that only her strict sense of justice kept her from lamentation.

It was four days after Danny's afternoon

call, and Mrs. Nat had unexpectedly arrived the night before, bringing all sorts of mysterious boxes and packages to be deposited with Hannah Ann until the evening of the supper. She had been somewhat impressed by the triumphant recital of Danny Sneath's transformation into an upright character, but she evidently held some reservations in her own mind, refusing to give an opinion on the matter till she should have more leisure to appreciate it.

She had run over from her own breakfast table to take a cup of morning chocolate with the three girls, who were enjoying a dainty tray in Miriam's corner.

"Marty isn't much to look at," she said, nibbling a bit of toast; "but to my mind she's the best of all those miserable creatures—I beg your pardon, Miss Pat. I didn't mean to tread on anyone's toes. Only, as you know, I'm an obstinate mule and I stick to my own opinions in spite of myself. What train is Elinor coming on?" she asked, to make a diversion.

"The ten o'clock," replied Patricia, responding with her customary brightness.

"We've such a busy morning! Marty is to take another sewing lesson and I've two pupils who simply insist on beginning before the holidays are really over, and I have to finish the drapery of my dress for the supper. It's a blessing I didn't give in about the pageant. They're practicing again this morning for the last time. The girls all say they'll be glad when it's over. Mr. Long is terribly strict about it. He is expecting some company, they say, and wants everything fine as possible."

Mrs. Nat chuckled. "I can guess who's coming," she said cocking her head wisely. "You'd best make up your mind to sell out, Miss Pat, for you may have to take less if he gets the senator's daughter to say 'yes' this time."

Patricia shook her head. "It's no use talking about that," she returned decisively. "I'm a mule, too, Mrs. Nat, and I just won't do it till I have to."

Mrs. Nat patted her shoulder as she rose. "Suit yourself, my dear," she said kindly. "I rather like your spunk. I'll be over later to talk old-fashioned talk to

Elinor. Good-bye, Miriam. Come along, Judy-girl, Mama wants to see you this very minute. She had something very special to tell you."

Patricia looked after the two with shining eyes. "Isn't Mrs. Nat the dearest ever?" she said, smiling across the tray at her chum. "We're awfully lucky to have such good friends, aren't we, Miriam? She's just as nice and interested in our small doings as she used to be when she hadn't so many other pleasant things to take her time."

Miriam nodded, though there was a shade less enthusiasm in her tone as she replied. "She doesn't change easily, you know, even in little things," she said carelessly. "Have you brought that lace fichu down for me to fix for you? We haven't much time, you know."

The morning flew on winged feet. The dresses for the supper were arranged to both girls' satisfaction. Miriam was to wear the costume Mrs. Nat had promised her, since it was a wide-skirted loose dress that suited easily her enforced position, while Patricia had unearthed a pale violet shot silk, with

draped panniers, and a fichu of thin old lace from her aunt's chests in the lumber room. Judith's little high-waisted white satin with the fan and head-dressing their great-great-grandmother had worn to be married in was already carefully laid out on the green-room bed. Judith was not in the habit of postponing things. The task of settling on the details was an absorbing one and Patricia had to be torn away from it first by her eager pupils and then by the advent of Marty Sneath, and finally by the jingle of Elinor's sleigh-bells.

She flung down the lace mittens she had been laboriously darning and rushed to the door, flinging it wide in welcome to the lovely sister who came smiling up the red brick path.

"Oh, Norn, you darling," she cried in a perfect whirl of love and admiration. "How perfectly adorable of you to come for our party! Miriam's just crazy to see you," and she ushered Elinor into the room, hurrying her over to the invalid's corner before she could get breath for a reply.

"Doesn't Miriam look well?" she

demanded in the same rapid flow. "Haven't we taken splendid care of her? And how stunning you're looking in that lovely fur. Oh, Norn, I'm too glad to see you for words." And she flung herself into Elinor's ready arms with a little gasp between sobbing and laughing, while Marty Sneath stood transfixed with the vision of so much love and loveliness.

Elinor kissed Patricia, greeted Miriam, and turned to the staring Marty with a question in her eyes, which Miriam responded to eagerly, introducing Marty as the model for the drawings which Elinor planned to make while at Greycroft.

Marty was unusually diffident, although it was plain that she was overcome by admiration rather than a less agreeable feeling, and it took all of Elinor's delicate tact to set her enough at ease to agree to pose for her. She kept her vivid eyes glued to Elinor's lovely face and repeated over and over again, "But I ain't pretty enough. I'm orful plain." And it took the combined efforts of the three to persuade her that she was just the precise sort of model

that Elinor was sorely in need of for her work.

Elinor looked after her as she went out to take a lesson from Hannah Ann in domestic science, as Miriam called it.

"I like that youngster," she said. "There's something to her, in spite of her very evident faults. Where did you get hold of her?"

They explained that the family was one lately moved into the village, but they passed lightly over Marty's qualifications. "You ought to see Danny!" they cried in a jubilant chorus. "He's a perfect wonder."

Elinor laughed lightly as she pulled off her gloves. "Then I should not like him half so well," she said; "I've always found that perfect wonders are dreadful bores. Where is Judy? I thought I'd see her at the station."

Patricia explained that Judith had not yet returned from Spicers' and was giving a humorous account of her literary activities when Judith and Mrs. Spicer came in together, carrying a bundle of pewter dishes

and brass candlesticks for the festivity the next night.

Judith laid down her parcel sedately and moving quietly, as she did when deeply moved or interested, she went to Elinor and put both arms about her neck, kissing her first on one cheek and then on the other.

"I think you will be glad to know, Elinor dear," she said, very formally, "that Mama Shelly has sold another story for me to a Sunday-school magazine in Washington. She met the editor at a reception and told him about the newspaper story and he took the one I'd written about St. Elizabeth of Hungary right away."

Patricia broke into ready applause. "Good for crafty little Judy!" she cried, seizing the sedate authoress and dancing a few steps with her. "My word, but you're a versatile producer, Ju! Penny dreadfuls and the lives of saints knocked off with the same ease. You little sinner, you never told me about sending a story with Mama Shelly."

"Of course not," replied Judith calmly. "It mightn't have got sold and then you'd

have been asking about it and I'd have had to tell you it was a failure. I'd rather wait till my things are in print before I tell the family."

Patricia surveyed her with a wondering shake of the head. "My, my, what a clever Judy it is," she said, appealing to Miriam. "Did you ever see so talented a lot as my family, partner? Here's Elinor making herself famous faster than you can keep up with her, and Judith blooming out into a newspaper correspondent and religious writer in one, while Ted's on the debating lists and president of the basket-ball team——"

"And Miss Pat is raising chickens and teaching music and tending her good-for-nothing friends like an angel," broke in Miriam with a flash of jealousy for her chum. "They may be rather clever, but you'll match them if they'll give you time, won't she, Elinor?"

Elinor reached out with a tender gesture to smooth the tumbled gold of Patricia's curls. "We are all looking to Miss Pat for the real genius of the family," she said with

such depth of love in her voice that Patricia was moved beyond her own volition.

Stooping to bend her direct, candid gaze full in her sister's eyes, she drew a long breath and said tremulously, "I'm going to try with all my might. Indeed, I am. When Madame Milano comes she'll find——"

A squeal from Judith and an exclamation from Miriam made her realize what she was saying. She clapped one pink palm over her lips, but was too late. Elinor had understood.

"I suppose Judith told you," she said quietly. "And perhaps it is really better for you to be prepared. Bruce wanted me to send word directly to you, but I was afraid it might make you nervous. I'm glad you feel as you do about it. It is a great relief to my mind, for I dreaded telling you, for fear you might hope too highly and be disappointed."

Patricia raised her sunny head proudly. "I can't hope too highly, Norn dear," she declared with shining purpose. "And I shan't be disappointed, no matter how long

I have to wait. I've made up my mind to be patient now and I do believe I'm succeeding. I've won out on the Patrick Hennery and I'm ready at last for the real work of my life."

This was the sort of scene that appealed to Judith, and she was much impressed by the words and attitude of her light-hearted sister.

"Oh, Miss Pat, do let me write that down," she cried, searching frantically in the music-rack for a tablet and pencil. "You look so uplifted and *impeccable*, I'd like to write down a description of you right away."

The three older girls bubbled with amusement and the spell was broken.

"Now tell me all about everything that has happened since we left," said Elinor, settling down beside Miriam's couch and preparing for a long chat. "I'm simply starved for news of dear old Greycroft."

CHAPTER XIV

PARTY DRESSES

"HOW do I look, Elinor?" asked Judith, standing before the long mirror in the blue room with a rather anxious expression on her face.

The room was littered with gloves, fans, flowers and all the delightful clutter of odds and ends which are the signs and symbols of a fancy-dress party.

Elinor, in a blue-flowered silk, with her hair powdered to snowy whiteness, was trying, by the light of the candles on the dressing-table, to place two tiny spots of black court-plaster in the precise place she desired them to go, but she paused and looked about with ready interest.

Judith was dressed in the shimmering short satin gown of their tiny great-great-grandmother, and Patricia had done her pale hair high on her head, piling pale roses on the ashy gold with accurate taste.

The one coquettish curl that strayed over Judith's slender neck and the feather fan which she waved were the only touches of young ladyhood in the sedate little figure. In spite of the mature dress and the high-piled hair, Judith looked very much of a little girl indeed, and Elinor smiled on her in swift relief.

"You look perfectly adorable," she said heartily. "I was afraid my dearest Judy was going to be transformed into a stiff-starched grown-up; but you're the sweetest little fairy that one could wish to see. Tell Miss Pat and Miriam I take it all back. You're our same little Judy only twice as sweet as ever."

"Who's talking about me?" asked Patricia's gay voice, and she appeared in the doorway with her hands full of flowers and her eyes dancing. "Here are a lot of white orchids that Mr. Long sent over to 'the hostess at Greycroft.' They won't go with either Miriam's dress or mine, so you'll have to wear them, Judy, to save our face, as the Chinese say. Put them on her, will you, Elinor? I've lots to do to myself yet."

Elinor looked up laughing and then caught her breath with a quick stab of mingled pain and pleasure at the figure framed in the darker panel of the doorway.

"Oh, Miss Pat, my dear," she said in a startled tone, and then fell silent.

Patricia, in the violet silk, with a white and gold petticoat and her bright curls high-dressed with violets and green leaves, was so transformed by her costume that Elinor saw for the moment only a high-bred beauty of the old régime dressed out in her best for some stately rout or ball. Then Patricia rippled out in her sunniest fashion at the surprise in her older sister's face and Elinor came to herself with a start. Jumping up, she reached a trembling hand to touch the dimpling cheek, and said in breathless, shaken tones, "You gave me such a start, Patricia! I hardly knew you in those clothes. You seemed like some old-time figure from a play instead of our Miss Pat."

"Oh, isn't she splendid?" cried Judith, who had been occupied with her fan chain and now raised her head. "Why, Miss

Pat, you'll make a perfectly lovely actress when you have to be an opera-singer——"

"Oh, don't, Judith," said Elinor in positive pain. "I can't bear to think of it—our Miss Pat out in the big world by herself. Oh, I hope that Madame Milano will say you shall never, never sing!" she ended passionately. "We'll never be the same three together again if you go away from us like that."

Patricia was much moved by this outburst from the calm Elinor and she hastened to comfort her as best she might. "That's the way I felt when you were going to marry Bruce and go abroad," she said, soothingly. "But you know it didn't make an atom of difference to us, after all. Don't fret, Norn dear, there isn't a thing in the world that shall come between us, remember that. We three have been through too much together to change at this late day. Come on, Judy, take these flowers and, Norn, tell me if my hair's done right. I've been so busy getting Miriam ready that I haven't had time to see myself."

Elinor recovered herself quickly and was

ready to praise and admire in her usual sweet way. She helped pin the orchids in Judith's satin girdle and to adjust the folds of Patricia's panniers to a nicety, and then they went downstairs to the south room where Miriam was awaiting them.

The big room was all a-twinkle with candles and firelight. Little tables with Christmas favors were placed all about the room, and Elinor gave a cry of admiration at the array of pewter dishes, old glass and antique china that Mrs. Nat had collected to grace her supper tables.

"Where in the world did you get such a complete outfit?" she asked eagerly. "I've never seen such beautiful pewter. That fluted pattern is lovely. I wish Bruce could see this."

Mrs. Nat came forward smiling with pleasure. "Hiram Todd unearthed that set from his mother's attic," she said, cocking her head triumphantly. "He's been a great help to me, Hiram has. You've no idea how much sense he's got when you really know how to get it out of him. What do you think of my costume?" she

asked with one of her pounces. "I'm one of my own grandmothers."

The brown silk Quaker bonnet with the sober drab full-skirted dress, white kerchief and under-cap suited her admirably and all declared she ought to return to the Orthodox faith of her ancestors. Miriam, in her pink-sprigged muslin, called for the next outburst of applause and Patricia declared that she hadn't another word to express herself with and please not to ask her to admire another single thing.

But the next moment she was exclaiming over the decorations. Little silk American flags were intertwined with the holly and laurel and big branches of glowing ripe cherries hung temptingly on each wall, while on the tables tiny cherry trees in dear little green pots shone between the twinkling candles and gave a gayer note to the pale pewter and dull old-fashioned glassware.

"It's perfectly sweet, Mrs. Nat!" she cried. "Where in the world did you get real live cherries at this time of year? They're regular George Washington cherries, aren't they?"

Mrs. Spicer chuckled. "You don't suppose they are real cherries?" she said with gratification in her voice. "They'd be worth their weight in gold—almost. They're cranberries threaded on little twigs and stuck on laurel branches. They do look like the real article, though, when you aren't in the secret."

"What ducks of place-cards, too," said Patricia, bending over the tables. "I don't see how you ever got so many pretty things together. Why, there isn't a set of old pewter in this whole village, and as for those funny cups without handles and those cunning little glass cup-plates, they're almost extinct in these parts. I went about with Miss Warner summer a year when she was trying to get some, and I know every scrap of such stuff in the village."

Mrs. Nat chuckled. "Nathaniel had a grandmother once who looked ahead far enough to value pewter," she said. "And we're getting the benefit of it. But here comes another surprise Judith and I got up for you two good little girls. We knew

Henry would need help and we hired an assistant for him. Here he comes to see if you have any orders for him."

She beckoned and a quaint figure strutted out from behind the portieres. A suit of red cloth faced with white, knee breeches and buckled shoes adorned the slender figure, while powdered hair and a graceful black-ribboned cue decorated his head.

Miriam and Patricia found voice together. "Danny!" they cried in delight. "How cute! And how dear of Mrs. Nat to think of it!"

Danny was well pleased with their tribute, which he took entirely to himself. "I tell you this is great," he said, strolling to the mirror and calmly surveying himself in it. "This beats chicken raisin'. Think I'll try to get a steady job of this sort."

Elinor's eyes were on him searchingly and Patricia felt his words, or rather his manner, grate upon her for the first time. She was quick to rate herself for lack of loyalty, however, and after Mrs. Nat had sent their young friend back to Henry's charge, she said warmly, "He's doing so splen-

didly with Mr. Long that I suppose he's getting a tiny bit spoiled. You'll like him better when you talk to him again, Elinor."

Elinor did not seem convinced, but the guests began to arrive and nothing more was said. Mr. Spicer came in with dear old Mrs. Shelly as Puritans, mother and son, and then the company all came at once, as is the way with such parties.

There was a great deal of pleased exclamation and comment and a vast amount of turning one another about and admiring the taste as well as the quaintness of the costumes. The room with its wonderful array of bygone furnishings and its colorful decorations came in for its full share of praise and the time sped so rapidly that it was a full half hour after the appointed time that Danny, tugging at Mrs. Spicer's flowing drab sleeve, whispered that Henry said the chicken was spoiling and the pancakes were overdone.

Mrs. Nat motioned to Patricia, who seated herself at the white-and-gold piano and began to bang out an old-time marching tune, while Mrs. Spicer with Hiram Todd,

brave in Continental regimentals which suited his lank frame wonderfully well, led the procession to the places prepared for them at the little tables. Elinor followed with Mr. Long, and Ruth Grim with Frank Hallowell, and so on till they were all seated save Patricia and Mr. Spicer, whom she had claimed as her partner in the hope of getting a very accurate account of Hiram Todd's doings in Washington. Mrs. Nat was so little given to small talk that Patricia declared she'd just as lief ask Ted or Tom for a description of any happenings.

"Now, Uncle Nat, you're going to tell me every last thing about that Washington trip," she said as he led her to the corner where Miriam and Ruth were already very merry over their place cards and the witty verses written thereon. "We're all tremendously interested in Hiram, as you know, and we're dying to hear if he had lunch with the President or made love to any of the cabinet ladies or anything very grand and imposing like that, besides grubbing about with those stony old scientists."

Mr. Spicer shook his head reprovingly at her. "You'll have to hear the whole tale, Miss Pat," he said, smiling nevertheless in his kindest way. "We are all very proud of Hiram and his stony achievements, and I can't tell one without the other. But perhaps the others would rather have some lighter conversation?"

Miriam waved his polite objections gayly aside. "We've fixed this table just so as to be a perfectly congenial bunch," she said saucily. "And we'll have that whole tale or we won't let Danny give you any of that delicious game-pie he's about to serve us. Frank's as anxious as we are to see how rocks are looked on in the diplomatic world. He's beginning a collection of his own——"

Frank promptly interposed. "I'd want to know anyway," he protested. "Old Hiram was awfully good to me when I was a kid and I'd like to hear that he'd got some reward for his hard work on the minerals."

Mr. Spicer then began a very entertaining account of Hiram's reception by the various officials with whom he had dealings, and as

the tale dealt with some social diversions as well as the more serious side of department work, and Mr. Nathaniel had the gift of story-telling in its best, the table was kept so diverted that they were unconscious of the rest of the party. Patricia noticed that Judith, who was seated at a nearby table with her back to Mr. Spicer, seemed to be cocking her head-dress intently at times, but she gave no thought to it, being fully taken up with her own good time.

The supper was well on in its course, and the huge pewter platters with their curled lengths of country sausage, the pancakes with the maple syrup jug, the terrapin and the curried chicken had all gone the rounds more than once when Patricia, listening to an account of a description of a fashionable wedding, which Hiram had given at a White House reception to the wife of the very senator whose daughter had been mentioned, began to be a little uneasy.

"And after he had finished with that part of the ceremony," said Mr. Spicer with great enjoyment, "Mrs. Barnes asked him how the bride was dressed. Hiram looked

puzzled, rubbed his long chin and then brightened as he thought himself on safe ground. 'Why, ma'am,' he says with a smile, 'I can't remember details, but I think she had on a white dress with red spots.' "

Above the laugh that followed this, Patricia caught unmistakable sounds from the other side of the room, where Danny was occupied with the table where Mr. Long, Elinor, Marian Johnstone and Johnnie Carr were enjoying themselves.

"Oh, dear, I hope he isn't showing off before Elinor," she thought ruefully. "She'll never learn to like him if he acts like such an imp as he did at the tea. I believe those clothes have bewitched him."

CHAPTER XV

OLD AND NEW-FASHIONED DOINGS

"AND so I sez to him, 'I'll go along and scare 'em up for you if you want me to.' And he was tickled to death. He hadn't no dog, you see, and he wasn't any too spry himself, bein' awful rheumaticky in his legs."

Danny with his tray tucked under his arm was holding forth to the amusement of all about him, save perhaps Elinor, whose grave face and attentive manner marked her among the laughing group.

Patricia groaned under her breath, and the report of Hiram's eloquence passed unheeded as she strained her ears to catch the rest of Danny's speech.

He was evidently speaking of a rabbit hunt and Patricia knew that it was nice old Mr. Williams he was referring to as "rheumaticky in his legs," and her apprehensions rose thick and fast. Mr. Williams was a

gentle, kindly, inoffensive old man who was a general favorite with all the village, and she realized that if Danny's recital happened to include any mockery or trickery, the sympathy of his audience would be very promptly withdrawn. "And I do so want him to go on being good," she thought wistfully. "I wish Mr. Long would stop him."

But Mr. Long was enjoying himself too much to object to whatever might come, and he was the only one with any authority over Danny in the group. Danny went on in his impudent drawl that still was fascinating in its languid, amused flow.

"And so I snuck on ahead and I put the rabbit down in the grass natural as life and then I crep' back slick as could be. Old rabbit squatted there just as natural as you please. Never looked like he was stuffed with leaves on his inside."

So far Danny had the interest of his listeners. Everyone in the country knows of the trick of the dead rabbit foisted off on sportsmen as a live specimen by mischievous boys. Patricia began to breathe more

freely. "He's all right," she thought in relief. "I'm getting too easily flustered. There, Elinor is smiling, too, so he can't be saying anything heartless or—" but she was rejoicing too soon.

The next moment she saw Elinor's smile fade and the former expression return to her face, while she caught the words clear and shrill in Danny's dragging treble.

"And I sez to him, 'Run,' I sez, 'you've got him good with that shot, but he's gettin' away from you.' And he was that wrought up he clean forgot me and his rheumatics, and he hiked off like a three-year-old. But he hadn't gone a yard 'fore his rheumatics caught him and down he went head first into the brake and brambles, and he lay there a-kickin' and a-screamin' like sin. Gee, I never saw anything like the way his ole heels did fly!" and Danny gave himself up to silent and unholy mirth.

The faces of his audience changed swiftly and Patricia saw that Danny's heartlessness in regard to poor Mr. Williams' infirmity had shocked and displeased more than Elinor.

Johnnie Carr's pleasant face changed color and he turned impatiently from the young reprobate, while Marian and Elinor exchanged looks of indignant annoyance. Mr. Long was about to speak when Patricia, stung into action by the smug satisfaction on Danny's guileless countenance, beckoned him swiftly to her.

He came blithely enough, evidently approving of his performance very much indeed, and he seemed quite surprised at her curt command.

"Go out to Hannah Ann and help with the dessert," she said coldly. "Henry can attend to us now."

He looked at her in some wonder, but he smiled his usual slow smile as he obeyed her, saying with unbroken cheerfulness, "I was just thinkin' I might red up a bit for her. Shall I say you're ready for the gooey-stuff now?"

Patricia felt some compunction at her own severity. After all, he was only a little neglected boy and the joke, although undeniably in bad taste, was one which many of the grown men of the village would guffaw

over. She gave Danny a relenting glance as she nodded, and he sped away with his tray held high and a wide grin on his pale face.

Patricia dismissed the matter from her mind, feeling that she had been oversensitive, and for the rest of the evening she had a most delightful time.

After the supper was over and the tables cleared, they played piquet, backgammon, écaté, and other old-fashioned games for a while and then the floor was cleared, the rugs rolled up and a Virginia reel was arranged. The phonograph supplied the lively music, leaving Patricia free to enjoy the dance, while Miriam took charge of the machine, winding it up when it ran down and changing the needle occasionally.

The company was all in costume, and they made a pretty picture as they stood up in two long rows, with the candles twinkling and the silks rustling and the wave of plume and shimmer of satin coat and silken drapery. Miriam declared that she had never seen anything half so adorable, and when Mrs. Nat in her sober drab

led off, bobbing a sweeping curtsey to the blue-and-white-satin Johnnie Carr, there was a burst of enthusiastic applause. Elinor in her blue-flowered dress was the partner of Mr. Long in crimson velvet and canary satin breeches, while little Judith fell to the lot of Hiram Todd in his stately regimentals.

Patricia fairly pranced with irrepressible delight as the gayety grew and the two long lines of prancing "horses" swept the length of the gold-and-white room, and she bubbled over with charity to all men, including boys. As she followed Elinor in the line she caught her arm and gave it a little shake. "Don't be too hard on Danny, Norn dear," she whispered gayly. "He hasn't had his bump of veneration cultivated as we have, you know."

Elinor nodded rather indifferently. The subject of Danny's heartlessness did not interest her half so much as that Patricia's evening should be without a cloud, and she tossed the subject aside lightly. "I suppose it's all in the way one looks at it," she laughed back. "He is too recent a convert to be perfect."

Patricia was entirely satisfied and her feelings toward the offending Danny thawed to a greater degree than ever. She sought him out after the Sir Roger de Coverley had ended and made her amends plenteously after her generous fashion. Almost another third of her Christmas money went home with Daniel Sneath that night, although it is safe to guess that his family were not greatly enriched by the gift.

The evening ended with a quadrille or contra dance by four couples that were to be in the pageant and Patricia sought the corner by Miriam to watch the evolutions. Miriam was bearing the fatigues of the long entertainments splendidly and if it had not been for the unchanging position and the light rug that concealed her bandaged limb, it might have been impossible to accept her as an invalid.

"I'm having the time of my young life," she said as Patricia sank into the nearest chair. "I've the greatest news, too. Wormed it out of Marian by degrees. She didn't know she was telling me until I'd the whole thing patched together. She's

been writing to Hiram Todd while he was away——"

"So that's how Mrs. Nat heard about Danny!" cried Patricia, a light breaking in on her.

Miriam nodded and went hastily on. "And she's going to New York next week to buy a lot of new things." She paused triumphantly, while Patricia stared at her uncomprehendingly. "Well, can't you put two and two together?" she asked with an impatient giggle. "Hiram isn't the sort a girl would write to unless she was rather daffy——"

"Oh!" cried Patricia again, with another blaze of comprehension. "You don't mean to say she's going to marry Hiram Todd? How perfectly wonderful! Does Mrs. Nat know it?"

Miriam squinted her eyes. "Can't say. She's not over and above loquacious, you know; but I have my doubts that she isn't too much in the dark. She's been buying furniture in Washington, and you know they don't need any more in their own house. Mrs. Shelly just said

she wouldn't have another stick in the place."

Patricia looked at Hiram in his regimentals and Marian, to whom he was talking with a devoted air. "Well, well, of all people in the world!" she said in wonder at the turns of fortune that were shifting her small world about her. "When we saw Hiram lugging that spring rocker into the Social House on Donation night, we little thought he'd be on the way to becoming famous and going to marry an heiress into the bargain all in a few short months."

Miriam was more practical. "He'd been digging among those grubby rocks of his for years and years," she said sensibly. "Things have to come to a climax some time. There, they've stopped dancing and Mrs. Nat is beginning to say good-night to them. Do tell Hiram to stop on his way out. It will be such fun to congratulate him and see how he takes it!"

Hiram endured the ordeal remarkably well, his native dignity standing him in good stead, and Marian showed the usual pleased aspect of girls in her case. But

Miriam's words carried to other ears than the engaged pair and soon the whole company was in a laughing contest to offer the most hearty congratulations to the fortunate Hiram and to wish Marian all the happiness in the world.

After the guests had gone and they were talking it over while Mr. Spicer was carefully bundling Mrs. Shelly into her many wraps, Elinor voiced the sentiments of the others in the best possible way. She took Mrs. Nat's narrow head in its sheer white Quaker cap between her two loving hands and she kissed her on either cheek, saying with happy finality:

"We've had a glorious time, thanks to your unselfish kindness, and we all join in a testimonial that there isn't a better friend or a truer one than our dear Mrs. Nat."

Mrs. Spicer chuckled and cocked her head in her whimsical fashion. "Thank you, every one, including Mama," she said, hiding her gratification under a cover of mockery. And then with a pounce at Judith she said briskly, "You are up entirely too late, Judith Kendall. If your

aunt were alive and could see us, she'd go for me hot-foot, and serve me right, too."

Miriam giggled at Judith's calm reception of this criticism, but Patricia sprang up and rushed her small sister to the foot of the stairs, where she paused laughing and out of breath from Judith's quiet resistance.

"Mrs. Nat has spoken," she cried merrily, "and, like Joey Ladle, I say, 'Arter that you may all on you get to bed.' Come, Judy, we'll try the wooden hill," and she ran lightly up the wide stair, flinging a gay good-night over the green twined laurel on its rail.

Elinor looked after her with shining eyes. "Bruce has telephoned me just now that Madame Milano will come to New York a week earlier than we expected," she said with a flutter of apprehension in her tone. "That means Miss Pat will have her trial sooner than she thinks. I wonder if it'll be best to tell her tomorrow, or let her go on enjoying the belated holidays while she may?"

Mrs. Spicer paused on the threshold, and her pale eye snapped as she answered

heartily: "Tell her right off, I say. Miss Pat isn't the sort that's made of sugar and water. She'll do better for being prepared. Come, Mama, Nathaniel is waiting, and we don't want to keep the door open on Miriam too long. The air's like needles and the stars are shining like diamonds. Good-night, Miriam; good-night, Elinor. Remember, I have Marty till ten tomorrow morning for my redding up, but I'll send her over on the dot."

CHAPTER XVI

BROTHER AND SISTER AGAIN

ELINOR came down from the studio where she had been making some composition sketches and her face was troubled.

"Can I talk to you a bit in private, Miss Pat?" she asked of Patricia, who was busily engaged with Ruth Grim and Judith helping Miriam remodel the complicated lace negligée which she had received for Christmas.

Patricia sprang up with concern written on her face. "Is it anything about Madame Milano? Is she coming today?" she asked, as they went out into the library together.

She had been told of the change of plans and, as Mrs. Nat had predicted, the news had acted like a tonic on her, instead of affrighting her, as Elinor had feared. Her eyes shone with eager expectancy as she put the question and her breath came fast.

"No, it isn't anything like that," replied Elinor, leading the way to the dining-room. "It's something quite different. It's about the Sneaths, I'm sorry to say."

Patricia's vivid face showed anxiety. "Has Marty done anything?" she asked quickly. "I am always so afraid she will break out in some way. She's so careless and indifferent."

Elinor shook her head. "It isn't Marty," she answered readily. "I think you've misjudged her, Miss Pat. She's really much better than you give her credit for, although she doesn't show up well in the limelight, like your admirable Danny."

Patricia broke out gratefully. "Oh, then it must be Clara is dead!" she exclaimed with instant sympathy. "Danny said she was terribly ill last night. I'm so glad I gave him——"

Elinor shook her lightly by the shoulder. "It isn't Clara either," she said clearly. "Clara is getting along nicely. Marty says she is sitting up this morning in bed and will soon be about again. It is about Danny that I want to speak."

Patricia's heart sank with a flop. When Elinor looked like that she knew there was to be no trifling with facts. She listened to what followed with a slowly fading hope that her sister might be mistaken. The facts that Elinor arrayed were indisputable.

"Marty, as you saw, seems to have taken a most violent fancy to me," said Elinor, hurrying over the extraordinary effect she had on the easy-going Marty, "and while she was posing I tried to make her talk so as to keep her expression less dull. She was rather hard to melt at first, but after she had become more used to me, she began to talk most amazingly. I think she was unusually excited, for she went on to repeat things which I am sure she would never wish to have a stranger know. She herself seemed a little dazed at her own performance, but I was mean enough to let her go on, thinking it might be serviceable——"

"What did she talk about?" asked Patricia in a smothered tone. She had no idea of what was coming, though a sense of gathering gloom made her fume under Elinor's slow recital.

"She talked first about her sister who is ill, and the pranks they played upon her. Oh, Miss Pat," she broke off to say with amazed eyes, "you can't possibly understand such a point of view. They actually *enjoy* all the things we would pity them for! Marty said they had such 'loads of fun when Pop gets drunk and chases them about, and they hide under the beds and on the window-sills.' Can you dream of such a thing. Then she talked about Danny, how he had got so far in your favor, and she told, as a huge joke, how he sold cakes at the coasting-party and bought a sled with the money and went to a tea with you all dressed up in the clothes you'd given him, right under the nose of Mr. Long—'old Long' as he calls him—who had caught him stealing chickens from Red Top only that very morning!"

Patricia made a little sound in her throat and Elinor went on: "And Marty says that her 'mom' won't let Danny have any of the chickens he brings home from Red Top or the eggs either unless he stops making off with Mrs. Griggs' plates that she sends the food to Clara in. She says 'mom' is

tired telling Mrs. Griggs they got broken. Now, what do you make of your young gentleman? Is he as reformed as you wanted me to think? Or do you begin to see how he is shutting your eyes up by his clever way of talking and his bright speeches? Confess, dearest Miss Pat, that you have been deceived in this young scamp."

Patricia was not prepared to give in so readily, however she might inwardly be convinced that she had been badly used. She thought of the fund in her Christmas box and she rallied to prove her judgment correct.

"Mr. Long may have given Danny the chickens," she replied rather stubbornly. "He works there regularly, so he must be entitled to some reward."

"Call him up and ask him," suggested Elinor promptly. "Or better still, we'll stop at Red Top on our way to Hilltown this morning after that song you want. If Mr. Long takes sides with you, I'll give in."

Patricia made ready for the trip in a whirl of disappointment and resentment. "I

don't believe all that Marty says by a long shot," she said as she joined Elinor in the pantry, where her sister was chatting with Hannah Ann about some purchases for the kitchen which they were to make in Hilltown. "She's a sly, deceitful little thing——"

Hannah Ann turned with sudden warmth. "Marty's the only Sneath that doesn't deserve the rope's end," she said with a flounce of her skirts as she went to the kitchen for the list. "She's a good little cook and she isn't soft-soapin' everyone she comes across like that precious brother of hern," she went on in a louder tone. "I hear that Mr. Long's caught him liftin' fowl from Red Top. Jest heard Sam Brown tellin' Henry. Early this mornin'——"

Patricia grew very white and marched out into the kitchen, where she faced Hannah Ann. "Are you positively sure and certain about it, Hannah Ann?" she asked with stern intensity.

Hannah Ann was not one whit dismayed. She faced about, setting down the wooden

pad on the dresser, her hands resolutely on her spare hips, and she tossed her head. "I'm not in the habit of repeatin' idle tales, am I?" she countered. "Danny Sneath ought to be in jail this very minute, instid of only being sent to school. That Mr. Long is as soft as the rest of us. He wouldn't let the constable get wind of it even. He jus' frightened the young wretch by pretendin' he was goin' to send him over to Hilltown lock-up. Sam Brown says he was there buyin' eggs for settin' when it comes out, and he says Danny was scared 'most out of his senses."

"What are they going to do with him?" asked Elinor, her sympathies now rather on the side of the afflicted. "I shouldn't think they'd be too hard on him for taking a few chickens from the man he worked for, particularly when he didn't get any other pay."

"Any other pay?" echoed Hannah Ann in surprise. "Why, Mr. Long paid him good and he gave him things, too. He was awful good to him, the ungrateful little baggage. And although, that Danny has

been proved to have been takin' things from 'most everybody in the village, he's to be sent off to school like any better boy might be glad to, and kept respectable—if he don't fool them there, too."

Patricia murmured something about giving him a chance and not being too hard on him, and Hannah Ann snapped her up in a trice.

"You girls have taken Danny up because he's soft spoken and biddable," she said severely, "and you don't give a snap of your pretty fingers for Marty; but I can tell you this, Miss Patricia, I've never had a keener little cook nor a better scrubber than that same gigglin' Marty. Take your Danny-boys and do for 'em all you want, but give me the girl that takes hold like she has. Why, do you know what she's doin' now for that miserable family of hern?"

Hannah Ann recounted, to Patricia's infinite confusion, how Marty, in spite of her mother's opposition, had worked some reforms in the illy-kept home of the Sneaths, how she had been working an hour each day

for Mrs. Griggs to help repay some of the many services both the doctor and his brisk wife had so patiently showered on the unresponsive parents.

"And now tell me she isn't a patch on her brother, if you dare," ended the excited Hannah Ann. "I'll match her against any other girl of her age, too, for sweepin' a room. So there!"

Patricia gave in with a vengeance. She threw herself bodily onto Hannah Ann's starched bosom and burst into tears. "Oh, I'm so sorry about poor Danny," she sobbed, "but I'm so glad about Marty. I'll never, never think I know better than Mrs. Nat and Hiram and Ted and——"

"Here, here," interjected Hannah Ann, pushing her into a chair. "You sit down there till I get a cup of senna for you. You're all upset by those pesky children!"

This offer brought Patricia to herself very speedily and with the tear-drops hanging on her long lashes she smiled a little wistfully at the others.

"Don't tell Judy or Miriam I was goose enough to weep and lament over Danny's

downfall, will you?" she asked in a subdued tone. "I'd hate to have them know what a cry-baby I am, particularly when I'm supposed to be gathering nerve for my Great Event. Let's go tell Miriam about Mr. Long's being so nice to poor Danny, Norn. She never liked him and I think she ought to be shown how mistaken she's been."

Hannah Ann chuckled. "Want to pass the medicine on, do you?" she said grimly, amused at Patricia's crestfallen manner. "Well, here's the list, Miss Elinor. I'll be obliged if you can get the things for me."

CHAPTER XVII

THE VERDICT OF MADAME MILANO

"ARE you ready, Miss Pat?" asked Bruce. "She is waiting in the music-room."

Patricia came slowly down the stairs. Her face, although it was a little pale, was brightly resolute.

"Yes, Bruce, I'm ready," she responded simply. "Am I to go in alone?"

It was afternoon and an anxious group gathered about the fireside in the south parlor at Greycroft. Madame Milano had instructed Bruce to let no one meet them at the station, and particularly not to chance an encounter with Patricia before the meeting in the music-room at four o'clock. Consequently an air of subdued mystery hung over everything and everybody, from the moment the big sleigh came jingling back from the station at three with the famous prima donna wrapped to the eye-

brows and huddled beside Bruce on the back seat, until the hour the tall clock boomed out its sonorous notes and Elinor had slipped up to Patricia's room to send her down to the waiting diva.

The strain on Mrs. Nat's nerves made her very short with any doubter of Patricia's success in this trial of her voice, while Miriam was positive that she would never keep cool enough to be heard at her best, and Bruce, who was deeply attached to his bright, lovable sister-in-law, paced the rugs steadily, smoking like a furnace and glancing impatiently up the stair.

Judith alone remained cool and self-possessed. When Patricia, coming quietly down the wide old stair, answered Bruce's anxious question so evenly, she nodded and smiled at her approvingly.

"I *know* you are coming out right this time, Miss Pat," she whispered, sidling close as Patricia passed on her way to the music-room. "I just can't wait till I hear your lovely, heavenly voice floating out like an angel's. Do sing the spring song first."

Patricia promised, smiling down upon the eager, confident face. "I'll do my best, Judy-pudy," she said, with the color beginning to flow back into her cheeks and the sparkle to come into her big gray eyes. "Don't worry, Mrs. Nat and Miriam, I'm not a bit flustered. I thought I should be, but I'm really going to enjoy it tremendously."

After she had passed into the music-room and the door had closed on her, they looked at each other in silence and waited for the evidence of their ears to prove her valiant words.

They caught a murmur of greeting, brief though kind, and then a chord strummed on the piano.

"Hark!" whispered Elinor, amazed. "She is going to sing for her. Madame Milano is going to sing Miss Pat's song!"

The lovely notes rippled out like flawless pearls and the little group sighed at the thought of the untrained Patricia following that perfect rendition.

"She'll never make it!" muttered Miriam, moving restlessly on her couch. "Oh,

bother! Why couldn't she have sung some other song and left Miss Pat's alone?"

Judith held up her hand imploringly. "Don't talk," she whispered. "She's going to begin."

The same careless chords on the piano by the same hand. Madame Milano was playing for Patricia and Judith fairly bristled with gratified pride.

Then slowly Patricia's sweet voice rose and floated out to them, clear, true and unafraid, singing her little song with all her happy young soul.

Elinor's eyes filled and Mrs. Nat looked out of the window and sniffed hard. Miriam covered her face with her nervous hands and Bruce stood stock still, his cigar forgotten and his eyes alight. Judith sat with folded hands smiling slightly to herself.

The notes died away into silence and there was a swift little rattle of applause, and Madame Milano's high voice said, with a bantering laugh:

"You will make us to look after our

laurel wreaths some day, Miss Patricia. When do you wish to begin to study?"

Patricia's reply was lost in the deep breath that went out of every breast. Patricia had passed the test. The moment of doubt and anxiety was over!

It was a very flushed and triumphant Patricia who appeared a few minutes after, following Madame Milano from the music-room as if from some high place of worship, and slipping into the background while the others pressed to show their gratitude to the singer for her great kindness and generosity in so serving a simple young girl.

Madame Milano smiled upon them most graciously. "Do not misjudge me, my friends," she said with a little pleased laugh. "I should not have taken this snowy trip if I had not thought it would prove worth while. I am looking forward to your little Miss Pat singing before the royalties some fine day, and a pilgrimage to the home of any celebrity is one of my hobbies."

Patricia knew that part of this agreeable speech was due to the Madame's stage

training to meet any occasion gracefully, but there was enough in it to make her squeeze Judith very hard as they sat together on the end of Miriam's couch.

"Isn't it glorious, Ju?" she whispered. "I'm so excited I can hardly sit still. I just can't realize it yet."

Judith tossed her pale mane. "Pooh, I knew you would do it this time," she returned calmly. "I have an account of it all written out to send to the *Telegraph*——"

"Judith Kendall, don't you *dare!*" glared Patricia. "I'll never forgive you to my dying day."

Judith gave in gracefully. "Perhaps it mightn't look awfully well, as they know I write the things now. I did Hiram Todd's visit to Washington and his romantic engagement so well that they've asked me for another as soon as I could give it to them. But I won't send this one, Miss Pat. Honestly, I won't."

Miriam was gazing at them with scandalized eyes. "Stop your whispering, you two," she said in a shocked tone. "I'm

ashamed of you, Patricia, behaving like some baby when you're going to be a great singer and have all sorts of splendid doings at court and the like."

Patricia bubbled at her sober face. "Madame Milano isn't thinking about me now," she said candidly. "She's forgotten I ever existed. All she's thinking about is how soon Bruce is going to take her back to New York. She's seen the old house that the Van Kelts were talking so much about, and she's looked on the hills and meadows the miser introduced to her notice by being an ancestor of one of her best friends in Dutchland, and she's made me the happiest girl in the whole wide world," her voice broke a bit and then steadied, "and she must get back in time to take the train to Chicago tonight. Why should she want to be bothered by us small fry any more?"

Madame Milano was, in fact, quite intent on making the next train, and after being refreshed by some strong tea and nibbling a sweet biscuit as she chatted with Elinor and Mrs. Nat, she turned to Bruce with a smile.

"I fear we must say good-bye to your hospitable house," she said to Elinor. "If your good husband will forgive my haste, I must say a farewell to you all, and fly."

She looked about as they all rose, and her face lighted as she met Patricia's ardent gaze. "Good-bye, my little nightingale." She held out her ungloved hand. "We shall meet soon, I hope. I desire that you begin your studies at once. *Au revoir.*"

She was gone with a great bustle and many reiterated thanks from the happy group in the doorway. The sleigh jingled off into the fast falling twilight and Mrs. Nat turned to Elinor as she closed the door on the snowy out-of-door world.

"Now the next thing for us to do," she said with great relish, "is to see that the Madame's instructions are carried out promptly. When can you be ready to begin study, Miss Pat? And where is she to go, Elinor—Boston or New York?"

Before Elinor could answer, Patricia broke out in amazed denial of such impossible speed. "I can't leave Greycroft for ever

so long," she said emphatically. "There are lots and lots of things to do before I go."

Elinor laughed at her earnestness. "Come and sit down around the fire and talk, all of you," she invited. "I have some confessions to make and I need support. Miss Pat dear, put your arm about me, so. Now, are you all ready to hear the sad tale?"

Patricia bubbled, Mrs. Nat chuckled and Miriam rippled merrily. Judith alone was sober.

"I think we ought to be more serious, Elinor," she said with a wistful little frown on her smooth brow. "If Miss Pat's going to be far away from us, we oughtn't to seem as though we were glad about it."

Elinor made a laughing face at her. "Madame Wiseacre, listen ere you chide," she replied. "Miss Pat isn't going far away from us. She's going to New York—oh, not to live right in the same house with us, Madame Milano wouldn't hear to that. It would choke her personality, she says"—Miriam gave an amused grunt—"but she's going to board near us and study in a big

studio building right next to Bruce's studio. And she's going to sell the Patrick Hennery tomorrow to that nice Mr. Long—who, by the way, is engaged to an equally nice girl I met this winter—and, first of all, she's going to take a tiny little trip to speed Miriam on her southward way, while we get everything in shape for her to start in with her work. How does that suit the assembled company? Does anyone find any objections to this scheme? Because if they do, Bruce and I are prepared to defend it with our lives. Come, Miss Pat, haven't you anything to say to it?"

Patricia was sitting very quietly with her arm flung about her elder sister's shoulder. The firelight played on her serious eyes, her halo of curly gold, her steady pink mouth. Never had she looked so sweet, so unconscious of herself as at this moment of her triumph.

"What do I think of it, Norn dear?" she asked, shaking off her dreaminess and looking around the circle of friendly faces. "I think that I'm the luckiest girl alive and I say 'Amen' to anything you dear wise

people tell me. I've proved that I'm not much of a success at a good many things, and I know I am too happy to be a good judge of what I ought to do. If you say 'go' I'll go, with hallelujahs."

Judith nudged Elinor. "Tell her about Marty," she whispered.

Patricia looked up in swift alarm. "You haven't found out that she's a little fraud, too, have you?" she asked, fearful of having her perfect hour spoiled.

"Oh, dear no," laughed Elinor. "Quite the reverse. We are going to take her along to our studio to wash our brushes and take care of things generally. Hannah Ann asked me to get her away while she was 'soft enough to train a bit.' I thought you'd like to know that you two girls had done that much good with your work of reform in these interrupted holidays of yours."

"And they've done that Danny a good turn, too," added Mrs. Nat. "He might have landed in closer walls than a good school if they hadn't started Mr. Long on his track. Taking it all in all, it was a good day's work when you tried to put the good-

will of the blessed Christmas season into your own deeds, my dears, and more happiness will follow, be sure of it."

Patricia sat thinking hard for a little while and then she smiled across to Miriam. "Well, old partner, here's where the famous firm of Miss Pat & Company, Limited, is dissolved, I suppose. What are we going to do with the Patrick Hennery funds? I'll give you first vote."

Miriam pondered and then a smile crinkled her lips. "Let's present Mrs. Griggs with a dozen nice plates in memory of our departed hopes," she said mischievously, "and let's spend part of it for some real clothes for Marty and a new dress for Hannah Ann, and the rest we'll donate to the Poor Fund—we ought to make it a thank-offering for all we've escaped since we started the enterprise."

Patricia took the light words in earnest. "That's just what we'll do," she said, nodding her bright head at Mrs. Spicer, "and we'll make our dear Mrs. Nat executor. Will you accept, Mrs. Spicer?" she asked with a return of her gayety.

Mrs. Spicer in her turn looked long into the leaping blaze before she replied, and her words came slowly.

"I like that old fashion of pouring out wine for the invisible gods before the harp was struck," she said with unusual tenderness of tone and manner. "And it pleases me to think that you choose to pour out this libation to the invisible spirit of brotherly kindness before Miss Pat's music begins. I'll do it gladly, and I'll follow out your directions to a gnat's heel."

They sat for a while in musing silence and then Judith sighed a long, deep sigh.

"Oh, what a perfectly fascinating, *delectablous* time Miss Pat is going to have!" she said fervently.